Spring 1-1-2011

Grain as Commodity: The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens through the Northeast Rice Network

Amy Zader
University of Colorado at Boulder, amy.zader@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/geog_gradetds

Part of the Geography Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/geog_gradetds/25

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Geography at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Grain as Commodity:
The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens through the Northeast Rice Network

Amy Zader

B.A., Allegheny College, 2001
M.Phil, College of the Atlantic, 2006

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Geography
2011
This thesis entitled:

**Grain as Commodity:**

*The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens through the Northeast Rice Network*

written by Amy Zader

has been approved for the Department of Geography

________________________________________________________________________

Timothy Oakes, Committee Chair

________________________________________________________________________

Darna Dufour, Committee Member

Date __________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

HRC approval of protocol #0507.14
Zader, Amy (PhD, Geography, Department of Geography)

Grain as Commodity: The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens through the Northeast Rice Network

Thesis directed by Professor Tim Oakes

Abstract

China, the world’s largest populated country, is the world’s largest producer and consumer of rice. Since the early 2000s, there has been a subtle shift in China’s rice breeding priorities to developing better tasting, high quality rice. This shift is generally attributed to the increased economic development and a rise in living standards; people went from eating to be full (chidebao) to eating well (chidehao). Agricultural research began to focus on the overall quality of rice, citing both the need to be competitive on the international rice market and domestic demand for higher quality rice. This dissertation explores changing rice production and consumption habits in China as the Chinese state embraces the global capitalist economy. Specifically, I explore the ways that northeast rice—known throughout China as ‘high quality’ rice—has become a commodity on the Chinese market. Within this context, the state is promoting the consumption of high quality products in an attempt to shed its image as the world’s producer of cheap goods.

This dissertation places rice in the midst of China’s socio-economic changes. Rice is an important staple to the Chinese diet and is heavily regulated by the state, but, in recent years, it has experienced changes that reflect the state’s attempts at deregulation. At the same time, consumers, executing their buying power by purchasing and consuming new varieties of rice, drive the market for high quality rice. Whether it comes in the form of people, goods, or agricultural products, the Chinese state promotes ‘quality’ as an ideal that all citizens are expected to achieve for China to become a modern, civilized society. Indeed, the discourse of suzhi (quality) is evident in Chinese urban middle class society as people invest in education and other forms of consumption to enhance their individual quality. The state expects that these middle class citizens will govern themselves to form the harmonious society that Chinese leaders desire. In doing so, a new category of consumer citizens emerges in Chinese society. Chinese citizen-subjects are not just producers, but are also being active and discerning consumers as well.
Acknowledgments

This project was generously funded by the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement grant and a Pruitt National Dissertation Fellowship funded by the Society of Women Geographers. A Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship awarded by the Center for Asian Studies, University of Colorado allowed me to study Chinese in Harbin. A preliminary study was conducted with the support of an NSF East Asia and Pacific Summer Institute fellowship in Beijing. I am grateful to the Department of Geography at the University of Colorado for a Gilbert White Doctoral Fellowship and a graduate fellowship provided by the Center for Humanities and the Arts at the University of Colorado.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance, guidance, and support of a number of people. First and foremost, my committee at the University of Colorado has provided the intellectual guidance of this challenge. Tim Oakes, my advisor, has provided me with immeasurable support and guidance through the project. Many thanks go to Emily Yeh and Elizabeth Dunn who have worked with me from the time I arrived at CU. Also, Darna Dufour and Tim Weston have provided valuable time and insight to helping me develop this project.

In Harbin and Beijing, I encountered a number of people who were able to help me think strategically about my project and introduce me to the right people. In Beijing, Wu Laoshi and Wang Laoshi helped me get my project started and provided support in starting my research in the northeast. In Harbin, the teachers and staff at the CET Language program provided initial contacts and were always eager to give advice to me about my project. Jin Laoshi and all of his research associates at the Northeast Agricultural University were a tremendous help in getting my project started. I received countless help from people in China in assisting with research—there are far too many of you to name.

In the US, a strong community of Geography graduate students at the University of Colorado has enriched my research. My family and friends are all supportive and caring—you know who you are if you are even attempting to read this. Thank you all.
Table of Contents

List of Figures
Map of Heilongjiang Province

Part I: Introductions

Chapter 1  Introduction: 1
Overview of the Project
Quality for a Modern China
Background of the Study
Project Study and Research Methods
Research Setting and China’s Geography of Grain Production
Key Themes of the Dissertation
Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 2  Commodity Networks: 44
Conceptualizing Politics, Culture, and Economy
Conceptualizing Culture
Commodity Studies
Cultural Economy of Food Systems
Conclusion

Part II: State Modernization Projects of Quality

Chapter 3  The Chinese Project of Quality: 74
Suzhi and Zhiliang
Chinese Governance in the PRC
Suzhi as a Tool of the State
State Grain Agricultural Policies: From Mass Quantities to High Quality
Conclusion

Part III: Case Study of the Commodity of Northeast Rice

Chapter 4  Spaces 126
Regional Identity of Northeast China
Regional Identity
Northeast China
Agricultural Production in the Northeast
The Symbolic Characteristics of Northeast China
Conclusion
Chapter 5  **Economies**  166
The Systematic Structures of the Northeast Rice Commodity Network
Restructuring the Northeast Rice Economy
Technologies of Quality
Economies as Capitalist Retail Markets?
Conclusion

Chapter 6  **Cultures**  205
Key Actors in the Northeast Rice Commodity Network
Performing Quality
The Politics of Rice
Quality in Supermarkets
Everyday Practices of Rice Consumption
Conclusion

Chapter 7  **Conclusion:**  252
Governing Bodies, Governing Grain
Grain Production and Food Security
State Governance through the Market
The Economy of Food
The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens
Future Research Directions

Bibliography  269
List of Figures

Figure 1.1  Distribution of Chinese Rice Yields, 2000

Figure 3.1.  Chinese Food Pagoda.  Source: Chinese Nutrition Society

Figure 3.2 Percentage of Food Products in Diet (1990-2007)

Figure 3.3 Agricultural Production of Major Crops, 1990-2007

Figure 4.1  Regional Change of Grain Production, 1980-2004

Figure 4.2 Provincial Distribution of Grain Production, 2004

Figure 4.3 Grain Crops in Heilongjiang, 1989-2004

Figure 4.4 Fragrant, Ecological Rice from Wuchang

Figure 5.1  Labels of “Quality and Safety” and “China Top Brand”

Figure 6.1 Consumer Rice Preferences, all survey participants

Figure 6.2 Harbin Consumer Rice Preferences

Figure 6.3 Beijing Consumer Rice Preferences

Figure 6.4 Ahcheng Consumer Rice Preferences

Figure 6.5 Where Consumers Purchase Rice

Figure 6.6 How Consumers Purchase Rice
Harbin Prefecture, Heilongjiang Sheng Province, China
Chapter 1

Introduction:

Overview of the Project

For thousands of years, the Chinese have been diligently cultivating their land. Blood, sweat and tears have been shed over their soil in the pursuit of favorable harvests. This reliance on the land for so many thousands of years accounts for China’s strong rural essence. The need for rice production has led the Chinese to pay particular attention to irrigation technologies, improving cultivation. The agricultural way of life, centered around rice, has had a strong influence on the social, economic, political and ideological developments of ancient China. In this sense, traditional Chinese culture may be considered a “rice culture” (China.org 2002).

The acts of producing and consuming rice in China are part of a long history in Chinese agriculture. These processes are, as the above passage suggests, deeply embedded in traditional culture and ways of life. In China today, an electric rice cooker—programmed to automatically cooked perfect rice—is a standard household item. In banquets, rice is considered a ‘filler’ that is served at the end of the meal to satisfy the stomachs of those who have been participating in banquet festivities for hours, consuming meats, vegetables, and alcohol. Rice is almost always served plain, without the addition of spices and broths. Additionally, although gift-giving is a common practice in China, rice is rarely given as a gift; it would be considered an insult to the receiver, with the assumption that they could not afford to eat enough. All of the above examples suggest that symbolically, rice is the staff of life in Chinese society that has continued for thousands of years. Following this narrative that rice and traditional culture in China have not changed for thousands of years, it is easy to assume that, while other
parts of Chinese society have changed, little has changed with regard to rice production and consumption.

At the same time that rice represents a longstanding tradition in Chinese society, stories of China’s booming economy fill headlines in China and around the world today. Not only is the economy booming, but it is a capitalist, retail economy found within newly-constructed supermarkets and shopping malls encountered on city blocks all over urban China. This idea that the economy is thriving exists all over China. Consumers experience this boom in the plethora of choices and selections they encounter in stores that just two or three decades ago were non-existent. These choices are not only encountered in shopping centers, but also in choices of schools, jobs, and homes. People have witnessed and experienced these dramatic changes in China, and have a hope for the future. This narrative of a booming economy provides desires and expectations for future, modern lifestyles in China; the Chinese all believe China is moving forward fast.

These narratives represent, on the one hand, capitalist development and, on the other hand, traditional cultural values. Although a sense of Chinese nationalism is embedded and reinforced by each of these narratives, they lack a political statement. This sense of nationalism asserts that China, with its booming economy and hundreds of years of traditional culture, will soon take over the world. When I was in China doing my research, I opened many conversations with people by asking about China’s economic development (jingji fazhan) or China’s eating culture (chide wenhua). I found these topics to be easy conversation pieces. However, from experience, I knew that if I were to ask about politics (zhengzhi), people I did not know well would not feel comfortable talking about politics. Politics is a topic that remains absent in most daily
conversations in China, while the topics of rapid economic development and a strong, traditional culture are everyday topics. In the Chinese context, economy, culture, and politics remain separate, individual concepts, each representing a different faction of society.

Throughout this dissertation I argue that culture, economy, and politics cannot be separated from one another. This argument is shaped through an investigation of the discourse of ‘quality’ in Chinese society and economy. I do this by researching the commodity network of ‘high quality’ rice from the northeast of China. Over the past decade, the production and consumption of high quality rice has been rising in China. The general assumption economists and state agricultural officials attribute to the growth of high quality rice is China’s rising incomes leading to an increase in demand for high quality rice. However, an examination of the recent Chinese political and social landscape reveals a trend throughout China to increase the production of quality goods that extend beyond quality rice. In the early years of the PRC, the Chinese state encouraged modernization on the basis of the production of mass quantities of goods. This was evident in high levels of grain production as well as Mao’s support for families to produce many children. Recently, there has been a shift away from quantity as a state ideal of modernization and towards quality as an ideal of modernization. This trend is evident in the state’s campaign of suzhi renkou—quality population—aimed at families and promoting the one child policy in the 1980s. The idea behind the suzhi campaign was to encourage families to have one well-educated and well-mannered child, thus indicating the state’s shift from a large population to a quality one (Kipnis 2006). Today,
‘quality’ acts as a discursive and somewhat ambiguous concept that is negotiated consistently between Chinese state and society.

Over the past decade, China has witnessed the growth a retail-based consumer economy. Accompanying the growth of China’s consumer society has come consumer recognition that much of the rice produced and consumed in China is low quality and demand for higher quality rice. To feed these consumers, state agricultural officials have created campaigns to offer breeders and farmers incentives to produce high quality rice. Today a plethora of rice awaits consumers in supermarkets; most of the rice found in upscale supermarkets is high quality varieties of rice. What makes this transition to high quality rice sold in private, foreign-owned supermarkets dramatic is that just twenty to thirty years ago, rice was heavily rationed by the Chinese state. Rice farmers had to reach and maintain production quotas, and citizens were given ration cards they had to take to state-sanctioned stores to get their family’s rice supply. These changes in rice production and consumption are part of broader changes in Chinese society and economy as the state’s food security goals shift from simply feeding the population (chidebao) to feeding them well (chidehao). The discourse of eating well (chihaole) is now used by many individuals and families to express their satisfaction following a meal, whereas the popular saying used to express fullness after a meal (chibaole). As China has undergone this transition, my research documents the changes that both the Chinese rice market and Chinese citizens have undergone as rice has become a commodity grain.

All over urban China, supermarkets are growing. Along with these supermarkets comes a wide array of retail items. Consumers use retail markets and supermarkets to execute a relatively newfound freedom in the marketplace to buy and consume products
that they wish. The growth of supermarkets throughout urban China highlights the massive political, economic, social, and environmental transformations China is undergoing. What I find striking in this onset of social change and consumer culture in China are the effects that consumerism has on Chinese agro-food systems, especially rice. For centuries, rice has been the staple food product of the Chinese diet, but over the past century rice has gone from being a state-controlled staple crop to a retail commodity where new brands of rice are constantly appearing in the market and competing for consumers to choose that brand and variety.¹

I examine the ways that Chinese ideas of citizenship are shaped through the market for high quality commodity rice. Rice production and consumption are certainly important historical components of daily practices in Chinese life. However, the ways that these processes are politicized and controlled by the state have changed significantly over the past century. Rice has shifted from a staple crop that the state equally divided among citizens to a commodity grain infused with status and distinction in the marketplace. This dissertation traces what happens to grain as it becomes a commodity in the market. Moreover, the citizen-subjects of the state are gaining the skills, knowledge and culture of consumers. By gaining such skills, citizens are increasing understanding and executing their rights as consumers in the market. In this context, my research examines the social, economic and environmental transformations of rural and urban China through rice. As rice moves from staple to commodity, we can see and understand the broader context of social and environmental change in China. While many studies of Chinese agriculture focus on the production end of political economic

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I use the term ‘variety’ as a general term to distinguish the different types and brands of rice found in the market. In biological terms, variety would refer to japonica rice as opposed to indica rice and would not include the seed differentiations or cultivars among those.
change and its impacts on farmers, I maintain that we need a way to connect the forces driving production and consumption. A traditional commodity chain analysis typically investigates the hidden social relations in the production of food crops. However, in this case of the introduction of retail economies and consumer culture, I propose that cultural economy allows a more reflexive interaction between production and consumption.

Quality for a Modern China

In China, notions of quality and modernity are found in everyday discussions and interactions. However, the notions of what exactly the quality of an individual refers to are vague and ambiguous. Depending on who is making the claim that something is quality or modern, those ideas can substantially differ from one another. They tend to be based off the experiences of the individuals projecting the assertions, but the one thing that is clear is that quality is something that one should set out to achieve. The drive to achieve high levels of human quality is encompassed under China’s modernization project. In The Exemplary Society, Borge Bakken examines social control in the midst of Chinese reform and modernization. This ‘exemplary society’ seeks to dispel the totalizing control that Foucault’s (1977) ‘disciplinary society’ misses. Rather than focusing solely on state powers (as he asserts Foucault does), Bakken focuses on the importance of strategies of resistance, bending exemplary rules, and evading power and control through Chinese beliefs about and reactions to education, discipline, human improvement, and social control. While Bakken provides a detailed analysis of quality and technology\(^2\) in China, he is determined to depart from Foucault through exemplarity.

\(^2\) Rather ‘technocrat’ and the ways that technocrats and technological thinking have shaped Chinese forms of governance. See also Sigley (2009).
rather than discipline. Bakken constructs this argument through the ways that resistance is formed and developed around ideas of quality. By the state encouraging citizens to be ‘exemplary,’ Baken argues against Foucauldian totalizing ideas of discipline and demonstrates the ways that citizens resist such discipline.

Bakken’s discussion of the exemplary society is made possible, in part, by the Chinese state’s project to improve human quality. This ‘quality’ is based on exemplary norms and the exemplary behavior force for realizing a modern society of perfect order. Individuals are guided through the modernization process of the nation by improving their individual quality. Together, individual subjects and the nation make up the future dreams of modernizing China. Bakken constructs the idea of a modern China through roots and memories of the past, which are created in the present to represent the dreams of a future utopia of harmonious modernity. The Chinese state is both trying to tame and control the path of modernity, but also letting it run through the market. Chinese modernization is contradictory; modernity is both a revolt against normalizing social tendencies and also concerned with control. Bakken sees tradition and modernity as “interlinked in a system of social control where ‘tradition’ can also serve as transforming purposes and ‘modernity’ can mean stability and order” (2000: 5). He attempts to explain the consequences of these patterns of control through the technocratic elite that have ruled post-1989 China. Modern technical means and objective scientific thought have controlled society through the project of developing ‘human quality.’

---

3 Bakken may exaggerate his ‘exemplarity’ to oppose Foucault’s ‘disciplinarity,’ but his ideas demonstrate the ways that the Chinese state and society employ quality as an ideal of modernization. Although I do not see how he fully pulls away from Foucault, I invoke Bakken here because of his complex discussion of Chinese society.
Literature on contemporary Chinese society points to the ways that *suzhi* has infiltrated Chinese culture and is used as a form of governance by the Chinese state. The concept of human quality (*suzhi renkou*) is a keyword\(^4\) in contemporary Chinese society (Kipnis 2006). By Citizens see quality as a goal to distinguish themselves within society as *suzhi* has become a new form of class differentiation in Chinese society (Anagnost 2004). While the pervasiveness of quality in Chinese society has been well-documented (Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004; Sigley 2009), my project examines the ways that the ideals of quality have shifted from society where human actors are the main carriers of quality to the economy where products can also carry the label of quality.

The process of growing and eating rice is one that is infused with politics at both the national scale as well as the scale of the body. Indeed, because of the pressing need to feed China’s large population, both grain and bodies are heavily politicized subjects in China today. Chinese rice production has long been controlled and overseen by the Chinese state. In attempting to feed its large population, the Chinese state has managed the means of production behind rice production so as to ensure the population can be fed. At the same time, China has taken extreme measures since the early 1980s to limit its population growth. By limiting the quantity of its population, however, the state has pushed to increase its quality through the discourse of *suzhi*.

This project, then, is situated between the individual and the state. I examine the economic and cultural practices that guide movements and flows of people and products within China by combining the ways that the state politicizes bodies and grain. In

---

\(^4\) Kipnis draws on Raymond Williams’ (1983) idea of focusing on the sociology of language. When important words in society are used multiple times, new meanings are generated. These words then take on political meanings and reflect the values of society. By bringing this perspective to *suzhi*, Kipnis seeks to demonstrate the political values in contemporary Chinese society.
contemporary China, the consumption of rice is a practice of everyday life that individual Chinese participate in. However, given rapid economic growth and social change, China is in the midst of major social, political, and cultural transformations that affect and change the practices surrounding the consumption of rice. Indeed, quality is an important concept in Chinese society. There are a variety of different reasons that the market for northeast rice has risen dramatically over the past decade. Without undermining the importance of many of all the factors in play, I contend that the major driving factor of the commodity network for northeast rice comes from the importance that the concept of quality holds in Chinese society. Quality is not just a way to describe a person or a product, but it also represents a goal to work towards to be ‘exemplary’ (Bakken 2000). Within an individual, suzhi represents civil behavior and responsibilities one might find in a modern society. For products, quality represents, time, care, and standards in the production process; in addition to production processes, zhiliang also indicates a certain kind of consumption. Quality in an object (zhiliang) is transformed through consumption to become part of one’s bodily quality (suzhi). Together, we can understand how these concepts of quality interact with one another at different scales of the nation to come together to represent quality.

*Why ‘Quality’?*

During my research in the summer of 2007, the concept of quality emerged as a keyword used often to describe rice in my preliminary study of Chinese rice. The use of this concept struck me as significant in two different ways. First, many of the challenges in Chinese rice and grain production I had been exposed to had been concerned with the
issue of quantity, not quality. Chinese empires and governments have been concerned with growing enough rice to feed their large population (Perkins 1969); thus, it was the quantity of rice, not the quality that concerned the state. This concern has been more recently reflected in global environmental concerns of population growth and agricultural production (Brown 1995). Until the issue of quality of rice was called to my attention on numerous occasions, I had not been aware of the attention the Chinese state, rice breeders, and consumers were giving the quality of rice produced in China.

The second reason that quality rice struck me as important was because quality as a label for rice made me think of the discourse of human quality (Anagnost 2004). Since the 1980s, the Chinese state has been promoting the discourse of suzhi renkou or quality population. This discourse comes along with the state’s one-child population policy in an attempt to reduce the quantity of the nation’s population, but to simultaneously increase the quality of the population. With suzhi as a way for citizens to achieve certain characteristics that define them as having ‘high quality,’ zhiliang (quality in reference to products) represents a path to achieve a different type of quality, one that is labeled as such for economic purposes. When products labeled as zhiliang (or sometimes pinzhi or youzhi) are consumed in the marketplace, they offer a new choice to consumers.

Moreover, the work of consumption itself is part of what makes a product zhiliang. Also, by focusing on zhiliang food products in the context of suzhi in Chinese society brings the role of non-human actors into play. Indeed, a number of material factors (including land, soil, water, seeds, milling, etc.) influence the quality of the rice. It is the combination of these material and symbolic factors that call for a cultural economy approach to understanding this quality rice. In short, the concept of quality—whether it
is articulated through *suzhi* or *zhiliang*—is a significant part of Chinese discourse today and represents a path towards modernization.

While most of the Western literature has explored the concept of *suzhi* (quality in terms of people and population) with relation to China’s modernization process, I contend that *zhiliang* (quality in terms of products and goods) is conceptually similar. When a product is deemed *zhiliang*, it has the ability to influence consumers. In addition to *zhiliang*, quality products are sometimes described using the words *pinzhi* or *youchi*. Each of these words contains the Chinese character *zhi*, which translates to mean quality itself though it is rarely used as a single character. When compounded with *su* (which on its own means ‘basic element,’ *suzhi* translates to mean human quality or ‘diathesis,’ a medical word describing a predisposition or tendency. *Zhiliang*, the word describing the quality of products, is a compound of characters *zhi* (quality) and *liang* (volume). The opposite of *zhiliang* is *shuliang* (quantity). The contrast between *zhiliang* and *shuliang* is one that is often made in discussions of Chinese rice production.

*What IS Quality Rice?*

Describing quality rice is not an easy task. There are a number of different definitions and perceptions regarding what makes rice ‘high quality,’ depending on who the informant is. I had scientists inform me that in some cases, high quality rice was categorized based on a higher amylose content in japonica rice. The state characteristics of ‘high quality’ rice refer to the way that the rice is milled and also to a low content of

---

5 Amylose is one of two starches found in rice. Most rice with a high amylose content is long grain rice that separates easily into distinct grains when cooked. The other starch, amypectin, tends to produce a shorter grain, more clumpy and sticky rice when cooked. The goal of many of the rice breeders I spoke with in the northeast was to increase the amylose content in temperate varieties of japonica rice.
broken grains of rice. For consumers, quality comes in a variety of forms, including taste, fragrance, brand, where the rice is grown, and appearance. These different meanings of quality will be portrayed throughout the dissertation. Ultimately, northeast rice being ‘high quality’ has emerged out of a long history of rice production in the northeast and more recent marketing strategies to advertise northeast rice.

Interviews with Chinese rice breeders and scientists revealed that they, too, placed emphasis on breeding high quality rice. To these scientists rice quality was determined by a number of genetic chemical factors including: amylose content, gel temperature, gel consistency and texture. There are two main starches found in rice: amylose and amylopectin. Amylose is a long, straight starch molecule that does not gelatinize during cooking, so rice which contains more of this starch tends to cook fluffy with separate grains (instead of being sticky like Japanese sushi rice). Long grain white rice has the most amylose and the least amylopectin, so it tends to be the fluffiest and least sticky. Amylose also hardens more when cool, joining tightly together and forming crystals that melt when the rice is reheated. Rice that is high in amylose has a lower glycemic index number. Although long grain indica rice tends to have a higher amylose content than japonica rice, the goal that many japonica rice breeders are working towards is making japonica rice taste, appear, and have the same consistency as other forms of long grain rice. The gel temperature and consistency of rice grain also refers to its chemical make-up. When gel consistency is soft, cooked rice has a higher degree of tenderness, but when it is hard, cooked rice tends to be less sticky. Harder gel consistency is associated with harder cooked rices and this feature is particularly evident in high-amylose rice.
Because japonica rice tends to have a lower amylose consistency, it tends to have a soft gel consistency. Breeders are working to harden the gel consistency of northeast rice.

However, there are different characteristics of quality rice that are gained in different ways. As one rice breeder explained:

Rice has genetic characteristics. These include: shape, color, texture, density, etc. Rice also has acquired characteristics. For example, moisture, physical appearance and damage, immature grains, color from milling process, etc. As rice breeders, we focus on the genetic characteristics. But we also have to do a number of field tests to ensure that we find the best possible climatic conditions through which we can cultivate these characteristics.

Once rice is milled, that rice is inspected for its whiteness, translucency, number of broken grains, and the length of grains. Assuming that the milled rice is grown from seeds that are bred to be high quality, the milled rice is then inspected for quality based on physical characteristics, packaged, and receives a state brand of approval for either its brand, safety or green. Crop management techniques such as controlling water, balancing nutrients in the soil, weeding the fields, having even plant distribution in the fields, and harvesting on time also contribute to the ways that quality seeds can be cultivated to become quality grain.

Finally, the Chinese state has a number of ways of ensuring high quality rice to consumers. One of these ways is through its branding techniques. In 2000, the state created the China Top Brands logo. This label would be placed on packages of goods that the state approved to be a ‘top brand.’ As one top brand rice company employee related to me, characteristics of top brands generally include those that pass inspection for quality, have responsible workers who are committed to maintaining quality goods, and consistently produces and reproduces goods in a reliable manner. Although this
employee admitted some corruption occurred, the Top Brand label was the state’s way of endorsing brand names and companies it favored. Interestingly, in 2010 the state announced that it would soon discontinue Top Brand labeling with the idea that after a decade of Top Brands, consumers were already versed in top brand names associated with various goods. Now that a retail economy has been rooted, consumers can make their own decisions on what brands they prefer and no longer need the state to guide them. In addition to the brand label, the state also has labels for Food safety and Green Food. These will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

These many definitions of quality rice are plentiful and often contrasting, depending on the different actors and their position in commodity cycle of China’s northeast rice. Most of the rice scientists I spoke with who spend their days in laboratories doing genetic research on japonica varieties of rice asserted that quality depended on the percentage of protein to starch found in each grain. State policies for quality standards involve the production and milling processes, where few grains are broken and have a consistent clear (non-white) appearance. The varieties of rice grown also offer a distinction of quality, as some varieties consistently produce high quality grain, especially when they can be controlled in large fields with a homogeneous output (a common characteristic of large plots of northeast farmland). In supermarkets, my surveys with consumers revealed even more deviation in the definition of quality. For many consumers, quality simply refers to rice from the northeast. To them, northeast, as the geographic origin of production, is a brand that ensures high quality rice. Other consumers prefer to purchase packaged rice from an established brand name that is known for quality, a result of marketing strategies pursued by rice companies. Many
consumers articulated that certified ‘Green Food’\(^6\) rice was quality rice because it was healthier. With regards to health, other consumers noted that nutrition was an important factor. However, nutrition labeling was not always rendered visible on packaging. For other consumers, purchasing brand name rice from a package with a specific origin assured quality, while others preferred to purchase generically labeled ‘northeast rice’ provided by bins in supermarkets, a cheaper alternative to fancy and expensive packaging. Many consumers in Harbin report that Wuchang (a county to the south of Harbin) rice is the best quality rice of all northeast rice. For them, all rice that comes from this region is automatically the best, even though Wuchang County produces a variety of different strains of rice.

Clearly, there are a number of different definitions for quality rice. However, I consistently found that the broad concept of ‘quality’ was important in each way that it was articulated. Although some consumers in Beijing (especially those who grew up and/or claim ancestry from southern regions of China) claim a personal preference for southern varieties of indica rice, they recognize that northeast rice has a reputation for being high quality. Indeed, other forms of ‘high quality’ rice exist in China. Other regions of China grow high quality rice and many consumers associate imported Thai rice as being high quality. However, the northeast region, which includes three provinces, is the largest region from which all rice is automatically labeled quality, simply because it is from the northeast. Within the northeast, consumers knew the

\(^6\) Green Food is China’s own certification process for agricultural products that have been produced using less chemical fertilizers and pesticides. While Green Food is the official state name and the label most consumers associate with food produced in this sort of way, ecological agriculture (see McCoy 2000; Sanders 2000; 2006) is the scientific description that most scientists use.
specific regions where quality rice was produced, but also recognized that northeast rice was quite famous in and of itself.

Despite the different definitions of quality, northeast rice remains a commodity grain famous for being high quality. When posing this rice next to rice that is grown in southern China and/or using hybrid seeds, most Chinese will agree that this northeast rice is higher quality and more desired by most people. Many consumers are willing to spend more money to purchase this rice in the supermarket. What this indicates is not simply that consumers are helping to boost China’s economy, but that by choosing to purchase high quality rice, they are participating in a market economy where products are designed and labeled as quality. As China actively attempts to construct an image based on modernity and quality, the ways they are attempting to govern people from afar through suzhi discourse is being translated and transformed into the ways they are governing the economy by both creating retail spaces for consumption of quality goods and by creating a consumer desire to want to consume higher quality products. By doing so, the Chinese state is creating an image of modernity where desires in the market economy govern the population (Rofel 2007).

**Background of the Study**

In 2000, the Chinese government eliminated its price support for low-quality, early season hybrid indica rice (Hsu and Liu 2002). This move drew attention because, in the past, the state pushed farmers to grow double season, high-yielding hybrid rice to prove China could be self-sufficient in grain production. By 2004, despite a drop in the quantity of rice produced in China, state agricultural officials initiated a campaign to
promote ‘high quality’ rice (*People's Daily* 2004). The campaign to grow high quality grain represents a shift in government policy from providing grain to everyone to catering to a new consumer society where quality reigns over quantity. In this new context where the quality of rice is increasingly important, this research investigates the symbolic and material importance of Chinese rice using a case study of ‘high quality’ northeast japonica rice. Although a commonly established idea is that most Chinese prefer to eat long grain indica rice grown in southern China, short grain japonica rice from the northeast region of China has gained popularity as an export crop as well as a commodity grain in major urban areas. In light of the state’s discourse of *suzhi* and the growing demand for ‘high quality’ northeast rice, this research, situated at various sites of japonica rice production, distribution, and consumption, highlights the changing relationships between farmers, urban consumers, and the state as each actor strives to become a quality citizen. In this research, I combine studies of Chinese agricultural production with those of China’s consumer society in an attempt to uncover ways that the Chinese state unifies and manages both rural and urban society. In China today, both rural agricultural production and urban consumer society are driven by the strong hand of the state and extend beyond the surface of economic supply and demand models. This force of the state, however, is not always a direct involvement in the economy but can be explained by an exemplary model of modernity. I argue that quality is a sign of modernity that the Chinese state employs to drive and guide the Chinese capitalist economy. I demonstrate that this discursive approach to governance is visible in the production and consumption of high quality northeast rice.
The majority of this research fits into the field of agro-food system studies. Over the past decade, the literature on the geographies of agro-food systems has flourished as more scholars become interested in the connections that food can bring to our understanding of politics, economics, culture, and the environment. In addition to research in the geography of agro-food systems, this project contributes to discussions of contemporary forms of governance in Chinese society. Indeed, terms like ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘governmentality’ are found in recent studies of Chinese society and culture (Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004; Rofel 2007; Sigely 2009). My study inserts itself into these discussions by examining the economy of a commodity in this society.

In approaching how the market for high quality northeast rice has emerged over the past couple of decades, there are several approaches I can take. On the one hand, a number of political economic and technological factors in northeast China have increased the production of high quality rice. These advances in production techniques enable higher yields and allow for this commodity grain to be distributed widely throughout China, thus creating the market for this rice. On the other hand, the state has promoted ‘quality’ as a sign of modernization. Equating northeast rice with ‘high quality’ allows consumers to feel as though they are participating in a modern economy; they are no longer buying generic, low quality rice from grain and oil stores using their ration coupons, but they have the option of choices in a retail economy.

**Project Study and Research Methods**

This dissertation project is based on a variety of qualitative research methods, mainly structured and semi-structured interviews, ethnographic participant observation,
and consumer surveys (Geertz 1973; Yin 1994; Herbert 2000; Limb and Dwyer 2002). The project took place from June 2008 through October 2009 in Harbin, the Heilongjiang countryside, and Beijing. However, the project has roots that go back to the summer of 2007 when I was in Beijing doing exploratory research on changes in rice production and agricultural technologies in China. As an affiliate of China Agricultural University, I spent the summer making research contacts and interviewing rice research experts at universities and research institutions throughout China. I was primarily interested in how Chinese scientists were incorporating Western ideas of agriculture such as organic or biotechnology into rice production. However, I realized that by simply interviewing scientists and researchers, I was leaving out a significant part of the Chinese population: the consumers. Influenced by works in agro-food studies on consumption, I felt the need to incorporate consumers and consumer desires in my project. In China, consumers are not as informed or as opinionated over controversies about organic and biotechnology production methods as Western consumers. As I listened to consumers and observed the different rice options consumers were presented with in supermarkets, I became increasingly convinced that I wanted to understand the factors that went into consumer decision-making. Because high quality rice seemed to be a big deal to consumers, I chose that as a focus of inquiry.

Upon deciding to study the commodity network of northeast rice, I chose to locate my study in Heilongjiang province. While the northeast has emerged as a major grain producer over the past few decades, agricultural production in Heilongjiang has been the most significant. Because of the dramatic increase in Heilongjiang, I began my project in Harbin. From within this provincial capital city, I made contacts in the agricultural
research community. These contacts eventually led me to choose a rural fieldsite an hour outside of Harbin. That village, Minle village in Wuchang county, is known throughout Harbin for the high quality rice that is grown there. This village was where most of my research on production in the countryside was done (the process of choosing this village will be further discussed in Chapter 5).

The fieldwork for this project began in the summer of 2008. From June-August of 2008, I was enrolled in Chinese language classes in Harbin city. For eight weeks, I attended classes daily; some of these classes focused on basic skills aimed at improving overall vocabulary such as newspaper-reading or speaking, but I focused much of my attention on the one-on-one tutorial class and my independent project. This project centered on developing a research-based vocabulary and understanding of words used by scientists involved in rice breeding and production. My primary tutor and instructor for this project was a rice breeder at the Heilongjiang Academy of Agricultural Sciences. I used my two-hour a week class time with him as an opportunity to discuss the trends, challenges, and opportunities in northeast Chinese rice production from the point of view of a rice-breeding scientist. I recorded our sessions.

Following my time as a Chinese language student, I became affiliated with the Northeast Agriculture University as a foreign graduate student. My main contact there was also a rice breeder. He was my primary contact for the first few months of my research. Throughout my time in Harbin, I often shadowed the work that he and his graduate students conducted, thereby learning what they were doing and how it was done. I also traveled to several locations in the Heilongjiang countryside with this professor to both understand how his work was transferred from the laboratory to the fields and to
better understand the politics of agricultural technology transfer from universities to villages. During the first few months of my research, I worked primarily with my contacts in the rice-breeding lab at CNAU, but in addition to my formal affiliation at the agricultural university, I developed connections with key actors outside of the research community involved in the commodity network of northeast rice. These actors include, but are not limited to, managers of major supermarkets, owners of grain and oil stores, and managers of rice mills. Some of these connections were able to assist me in conducting further research in supermarkets and in the village with farmers and farming households. These participants were essential in helping me move my project along and played a key role in helping me gain access to supermarkets and store managers and owners that might not otherwise had been accessible.

As stated above, this research project began in the summer of 2007 with preliminary research in Beijing. It also included a trip to China’s Rice Research Institute in Hangzhou where I spent a week interviewing rice scientists, and a trip to an organic village in Jilin province. I then returned to China in the summer of 2008 to begin making contacts, identify key institutions, and study northeast rice in a two-month summer language program. In August 2008, I officially began working with rice breeders at Northeast China Agricultural University (NCAU) to set up my project. I made several trips to Wuchang county during the harvest season, and began making connections with businesses in Harbin. By November, I had recruited four undergraduate research assistants to help with consumer surveys in Harbin’s main supermarkets. These surveys were completed in December. I spent most of January and February 2009 in Beijing collecting similar survey results and following up with contacts from 2007. From
March-April 2009, I spent time collecting interview data in Harbin with grain and oil stores owners, supermarket managers, and other key actors in the rice network. I then spent May-August 2009 conducting rural household surveys in Minle, Wuchang county and interviewing more key actors in Wuchang and Minle. In September 2009, I returned to Beijing to analyze my data and continue following-up with contacts in the capital. I returned to the United States in late October 2009.

This research project is based primarily from qualitative and ethnographic methods. These methods demonstrate my attempt to capture the complexities of everyday life in urban and rural northeast China. Qualitative methods and ethnography seek to explore the processes of everyday social life and the meanings inherent in these processes (Herbert 2000; Limb and Dwyer 2002). Human geography, which has just recently embraced qualitative methods, is particularly suited to understanding these complex processes of everyday life. In particular, urban geographers have used qualitative methods to understand spatial and social relations (Jackson 1985) and feminist geographers have employed them to challenge the unequal power relations that are inherent between the researcher and her informants (McDowell 1992). The incorporation of qualitative methods into human geography intensified with the cultural turn when economic geographers (Crang 1997) and others throughout the discipline turned toward understand cultural practices associated with their focus of inquiry.

Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout the research, I collected my data through a variety of ethnographic methods; these specific methods included structured surveys, semi-structured interviews,
and participant observation. Using these three methods as categories, I describe in detail below how I selected participants, what questions I asked or otherwise how I collected data, and how I analyzed the data (Miles and Huberman 1994).

1. Surveys

   My research consisted of two different phases of surveys. The first survey (Oct. 2008-Jan. 2009) was a short survey conducted with consumers at supermarkets and markets. I designed the survey in order to identify the important qualities that consumers found important in influencing their choices in rice preferences. The survey was developed after several initial surveys revealed the different qualities of rice that consumers thought were important aspects of rice. I asked each participant to rank, on a scale of 1 to 3, the importance of such qualities as taste, price, brand name, appearance, production location, and whether or not the rice was “green.” In addition to asking consumers about their preference in the qualities and characteristics of rice they consume, the surveys also asked where they usually purchase rice and whether they prefer to buy rice from the bins (bulk rice) or packaged, brand-name rice.

   Participants were selected on their willingness to participate in the survey. My research assistants and I randomly selected participants by approaching consumers in the supermarket that day. We initially stayed in the rice and grain aisle to attract consumers who were looking to purchase rice that day. After realizing that we had selected participants who were not necessarily purchasing rice but happened to be walking in the grain aisle, some days the research assistants and I would split up to ask more consumers to participate. These surveys and their results are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.
Because these were short surveys, analysis could be done by compiling the results into a simple spreadsheet. While I consider the results of the supermarket surveys a useful tool, I do not intend to use them to fully explain consumer behavior. Rather, I see the results as a means to provoke further explanation from other people. Following the completion of these surveys, I made bar graphs to represent my results. Sometimes I showed these results to different participants in my interviews. I asked them to interpret the results and explain to me, for example, why they felt consumer trends pointed in one direction or another.

A second survey (June 2009) was designed and implemented for farming households in Minle village, Wuchang township, Heilongjiang province. Participants were selected based on their presence in this particular village and their willingness to participate. Access to participants was facilitated through a research assistant and a manager at a rice mill in the village. Although this manager was connected to a specific mill, he led us to a variety of different households that were not connected to his own business.

These surveys were designed to identify the ways that farming households participate in the production of northeast rice in a famous northeast rice producing villages. These surveys were more in-depth than the surveys conducted at the supermarket; they were designed to asked about work opportunities in the village, how much labor their household contributed to rice production, and household consumption patterns. Thirty-seven surveys were completed. Once completed, I was able to use the surveys to identify key themes that had emerged. Upon identifying these themes, I was
able to ask more in-depth follow-up questions with some of the households and managers of rice mills in the village.

2. Interviews

I also conducted a series of interviews with key actors along the northeast rice commodity network. Most of these interviews were semi-structured in that I compiled interview questions before the interview and then, depending on who the actors were, continued to ask questions based on their responses to the initial questions. Differentiate between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’? Where to draw the lines?

Beginning in the summer of 2007 with my preliminary fieldwork, I set up twenty-eight other interviews that were semi-structured and took place in a formal sit-down setting. Participants included rice breeders, more broadly trained agricultural scientists and researchers, employees of large grain companies, managers and operators of rice mills, and officials overseeing rice or green food production. I identified participants based on their involvement in the commodity network of northeast rice and their willingness to participate.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, most routinely these settings were in their offices or coffee shops. I set up all of the interviews ahead of time. Prior to the interview, I had introduced myself to the interviewee and explained my project and what I was interested in learning from them. The interviews lasted one to two hours in the language the interviewee preferred. Most of these interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and, if necessary, translated to English. In the cases where they were not recorded, I took extensive notes and wrote up the interviews immediately
following it. I analyzed the notes and transcriptions from these interviews by coding for key words and themes. I coded my material for key themes manually using Microsoft Word.

I also conducted eighteen interviews with grain and oil store owners; these interviews were more structured, but also informal. For the structured interviews, I approached the stores during the morning hours of street markets. During this time, the stores set up small stands outside their stores to sell rice. Throughout the months of March-April 2009, I visited over twenty of these stores in Harbin. During the morning, I would approach the workers, tell them about my project, and ask them if they would be willing to participate in my study. If they agreed, we would set up a time later in the day for me to return when business was not busy. I asked owners of the stores a series of ten questions about their store and business. I also included some of these grain and oil stores as sites of observation of rice-purchasing behavior, if the owners would allow me.

3. Participant Observation

Despite the pains I took to make my research methods transparent, there was a lot of behind the scenes negotiation that took place, both within myself and between me and those assisting my research. Many of my most significant research revelations did not come from the surveys and interviews, but rather from living, experiencing, and observing patterns of everyday life in Chinese society. Of course one of my favorite conversations to bring up about everyday life in China was the topic of food. Regardless of whether people talked to me about rice, I was interested in hearing where people liked to buy their food, what types of food they preferred, how food was prepared, who in the
house purchased the food and did the cooking, etc. Many people—including my friends, restaurant owners or employees, or people with whom I worked—shared similar positions and views on where to buy food and how to prepare it. Many also knew the best brand names or were aware of the places of origin where many specialty products were produced. These conversations provided me with a larger understanding of Chinese food culture; the views that people offered me will emerge in different parts of this dissertation.

Aside from daily conversations about food culture, my participant observations also included participation in activities that my supervisor at NEAU directed. Some days, this included me watching the activities they were doing in the laboratory; other days these activities included multi-day trips to the countryside to plant seeds, take measurements of seedlings, or to harvest grains. The observations I collected on these trips proved to be invaluable in understanding the interactions between rice scientists and the farmers and villages. My participant observation did not end with the scientists; I spent many days at grain and oil stores and at the large retail rice market just outside of Harbin where large packages of rice come in daily from the rice mills and are shipped to markets throughout China. I also spent time in the villages and even rice fields with rice mill workers and farmers to understand the transformations rice goes through at all stages of the commodity network.

After each day I spent observing the actions of those surrounding me, I would go home and write extensive notes of what occurred that day. These fieldnotes became my main source of data for participant observation. As I recorded the notes or re-read them, new questions would emerge. I would record those questions and investigate the answers
the next day I returned to that site. Similar to the interviews, I analyzed these fieldnotes by coding them for key words.

*Challenges with Data Collection*

My intent throughout the project was to interview and speak with anyone who would talk to me that was involved in some aspect of the food chain and could specifically talk to me about the market of northeast rice. I aimed to meet people in the supermarket industry, agricultural research institutions and bureaucracies, store and restaurant owners, rice mills and rice companies, plus a variety of farmers and consumers. One of my main reasons for incorporating participant observation in my research is because everyone in China could potentially be a consumer and thus an informant. I often discussed my research with friends who I did not formally enroll as informants to my project. When my friends gave me new ideas to think about, I took note of the ideas and then used the ideas that emerged from these conversations to ask other participants.

One of the biggest questions of access that I encountered on a regular basis as an American researcher were the promises that my research could bring. Especially in rural areas when I was communicating with managers and operators of rice mills that worked for rice companies, a typical response I received when I introduced myself was that they were getting free advertising by talking to me. As I will discuss, the politics of importing and exporting rice in China are in constant flux, depending on domestic need. Although northeast rice exports have declined in recent years, a hope to take on the international market lingers among those in the northeast rice market. Aside from simply being able to
advertise rice, many of these same informants thought I had connections to the American rice industry. They constantly asked me what I could do to help connect them to the American rice industry.

As in any relationship between researcher and those being researched, there are complex issues of power. I found these issues to be particularly complex in the gender dynamics of my project. In general, agricultural science is a male dominated discipline in China. My major contacts and affiliates were all in this discipline and were mostly male. Because my position as an American PhD student came with potential promises of future connections with America, I was given access that a female Chinese social scientist would probably not have been privileged with.

Methodologically, I learned a lot from this project. First, I learned that research in rural China is difficult. While I had a number of people who were willing to talk to me, the bureaucracy that enabled my research was difficult. Working with agricultural scientists who spend 3 or 4 days in the countryside at the most made it difficult for me to explain why I needed longer access. Once I was connected with the mills in the countryside, access was easier because the mill operators and managers were more willing to help. While they introduced me to many families in the village, the sample of the households I spoke with were primarily those that had guanxi with the mills and were a part of the company’s contract system.

Not only did I learn that research in rural China is difficult, but also administering surveys in supermarkets is not easy. Many consumers were willing to participate. Although my research assistants and I split the tasks, many people were interested in me (and my project) more than they were in answering my questions. For example, one day
a gentleman I approached answered all of my questions; in between answers he asked my assistant about me. The conversation went something like this:

A.Z.: When you are buying rice, how important is the appearance of rice?
Rice Consumer (R.C.): Very important. (To my assistant): Is she here to study or to travel?
A.Z.: And taste?
R.C.: Very important. (To my assistant): Is she Russian? (never mind that he was already told I was an American PhD student doing research on Chinese rice).
A.Z.: Nutrition?
R.C.: Somewhat important. (To my assistant): Her Chinese is good, where did she study?
A.Z.: Does the price matter?
R.C.: The price is important as long as it reflects the quality of the rice. (To my assistant): Is she used to the weather here?
A.Z.: Do you think whether or not the rice is 'green' rice is an important factor in buying rice?
R.C.: Green rice is very important. (To my assistant): Does she eat rice?

Like this particular conversation with this survey participant demonstrates, my ‘foreignness’ was a source of inquiry for many of my participants. I often entertained their conceptions about America and Americans in exchange for their own conceptions about China and Chinese society. Sometimes these exchanges led to fruitful dialogue, while other times, they acted as an obstacle because participants were so engaged in learning about America or about me that they had little to offer about China.

Research Setting and China’s Geography of Grain Production

The majority of this research is situated within the northeast of China in Heilongjiang province. While the historical importance of this location and factors that shape the commodity of northeast rice will be explored in-depth in Chapter 5, this study reveals how the political history, along with the environmental characteristics of the land
in the northeast, can facilitate the development of commodity grain. Harbin city and surrounding areas within Heilongjiang province have been a contested political region that the Han Chinese have only recently settled. Accompanying Han settlement in the northeast has come large-scale agricultural production, particularly in grains after the establishment of the PRC. Although the Han have made a lot of effort to turn the northeast from a ‘great northern wilderness’ to a ‘great northern granary,’ the Japanese and the Koreans that were in the area in the early half of the 20th century formed the basis for this transformation prior to the establishment of the PRC.

In addition to contributing to studies of Chinese governance and agro-food systems, this project also contributes to our understanding of Chinese regional agro-geography. When I began this project, the regional differences of rice captured my attention as my informants told over and over again that the northeast of China produced the best quality of rice. I saw this rice being sold in supermarkets in Beijing with the ‘northeast’ as a brand to call attention. The pervasiveness of the branding of the northeast as the origin of high quality rice led me to question assumptions about the basic regional patterns of grain production in China. As I heard numerous times in the past, the traditional characterization of China’s agro-geography is found within the rice-wheat line that separates the dry northern areas of China from the southern wet regions where rice thrives. This line represents not only the production of wheat in the north and rice in the south, but also carries the idea that the north consumes a diet based on wheat products whereas the southern diet is composed of rice. Still today in China I find people who will convey this narration to me, even if they are north of this line and report they consume a fair amount of rice. While this ambiguous rice-wheat line may have traditionally
separated Chinese agro-geography, I contend that the centralization of the economy, increases in transportation and migration, and agricultural technology have blurred—if not completely disposed of—this line.

The idea behind the line is not as simple as wheat only in the north and rice only in the south. In the dry, cold north, sorghum and millet grow alongside soybeans and corn. This is especially in the northeast where it sometimes is too cold for winter wheat. The climate along the Yellow River is more suitable for winter wheat. Traditional cuisines and food types have been constructed around these available grain products. For example, dumplings, noodles, and steamed buns made out of wheat flour form the basis of ‘northern’ food. In the south, where rice can be double- (and even triple) –cropped in a single season due to abundant water, irrigation systems, and large tracks of cleared paddy land, ‘southern’ cuisine is considered the combination of dishes of meat and/or vegetables served with bowls of rice.

Over the past few decades, increased transportation and migration, regional specialization, and the increased use of agricultural technology have blurred this rice-wheat line. While some argue that rice remains the dominant staple crop in most southern areas, wheat and wheat products are widely available. At the same time, the northeast region of China has dramatically increased its rice production of short-grain japonica rice. This short-grain rice can sustain a shorter growing season and higher altitude than indica varieties grown in the south. While this northeast rice is the main rice consumed in the northeast, a number of northeast people claim that wheat forms the main basis of their diet.
The Price of Rice

The rise of global grain prices has been in the news in recent years as I was at different stages of this project; concern first appeared in 2008 when I began the research for this project and again in 2011 as I am writing this project. While this project is not aimed at uncovering the hidden meanings behind rice prices, they certainly played a background role in this dissertation. Prior to beginning my research in the summer of 2008, the late winter and early spring months of that year witnessed a large price jump in grain prices. In the 20 months leading to April 2008, rice prices almost tripled, leading to a record 1.02 billion people hungry in the world in 2009 (Ruitenber, 2011). Prices had
climbed in 2007 by 33% and by 11% in 2008, leading to some of the world’s highest rice prices, and led many Asian countries, including Cambodia, Vietnam, and India to ban rice exports in 2008. Last year that figure fell to 925 million people as food costs dropped and economic growth lifted incomes (Ruitenberg 2011). While most Asian countries experienced a significant rise in rice prices that year, China remained relatively clear of those hikes. Throughout that summer and the following year, one standard question I asked researchers and those involved in the rice industry how China had been affected. Most people answered that China was not affected at all or very little because the government subsidizes rice enough so that it was not an issue. These issues will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Most recently, in late winter 2011, worldwide grain prices are in the news once again. Although global food prices rose 28 percent over the past year, reaching a record high in January (Ruitenberg 2011), rice prices have returned to what they were prior to 2008 and have stabilized. However, this time, the focus is on China because a drought in northern China brought fears of halted wheat production. This fear came at a time when grain prices were increasing in China and the government was alarmed they may have to import more wheat (Bradsher 2011). However, globally grain prices appeared stable because of stable rice markets (Ruitenberg 2011). Moreover, a last-minute irrigation effort, combined with rain and snow, appeared to save much of north China’s wheat crop this season.

In short, Chinese grain production is situated in a globalized world where prices, shortages, and excesses from other countries have the ability to affect Chinese prices and that China’s own production drastically can impact these global factors. This most recent
situation indicates that China is aligned with the global economy, despite the government’s strong hand in being able to step in and alter prices if necessary. As we will see in Chapter 4, the Chinese state has long been obsessed with self-sufficiency. Even today as more and more rural policies are meant to get the government out of the grain market, the state has the ability and the will to step in to adjust prices or to use new technologies when their self-sufficiency is in doubt.

**Key Themes of the Dissertation**

Throughout this dissertation, I aim to address and advance three key themes in Chinese geography and the geography of agro-food systems. I address these themes explicitly and subtly throughout the following six dissertation chapters and return to them in the conclusion. These themes include: Chinese food security, Chinese state governance technologies, and the economy of quality foods. As I tell the story of Northeast Chinese rice, these themes emerge to more fully develop the overall picture of why this topic is of upmost importance to contemporary Chinese society and the environment. Below, I briefly outline the issues of each of these topics as I foreshadow how these themes will re-emerge as key topics in the conclusion. Running throughout these topics is that as the Chinese state adopts neoliberal policies in the grain market, grain is transforming from a staple crop to a commodity. As grain transforms from staple to commodity, citizen-subjects of the Chinese state are learning to be consumers.
Chapter 3 directly addresses the idea of food security in Chinese agriculture and the environment. Since the Mao era, the Chinese government has relied upon grain production as an indicator of Chinese agricultural self-sufficiency and food security. During the Mao era, the state considered grain to be the ‘key link’ to agricultural production by structuring farmers’ quotas and consumer rations around grain production (Shapiro 2001). The idea guiding these policies was that as long as grain would be produced and distributed equally, people would be fed well enough to appreciate the state. The rural agricultural reforms began in 1978, and these kept grain production at the forefront of state policies. Farmers still had quotas of grain they had to produce to sell to the state, but upon filling their quotas, they were allowed to sell excess goods on the market (Oi 1989). While these state procurement policies allowed farmers to make money from excess production, they maintained grain as a key link between farmers and the Chinese state. Taxes were paid with grain.

Recently, the Chinese state has instituted a number of neoliberal policies towards grain. Over the past decade, the state has eliminated agricultural taxes for farmers, state procurement policies, and has allowed the privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises who process and distribute grain. While two of the largest state-owned companies remain involved in the market, a number of smaller, private companies have emerged. The state maintains a hand and has the ability to reach out and grasp grain production numbers when it needs to, but it has eliminated a number of policies that once kept farmers very connected to the state. As I will show in Chapter 6, it is not just policies towards farmers that have become more privatized, but the entire market,
including grain and oil distributors who once worked directly for the state are now entirely private, family-run businesses.

*Chinese State Governance Technologies*

As the Chinese government has adopted neoliberal policies in agriculture and other realms of the economy, its governance strategies are also evolving. No longer is the state’s presence felt as strongly in the lives of everyday citizens as it was during the Mao era, but it has developed tactics that have changed over the past decade or two that recognize the state’s ability to continue to maintain power and control. Under Mao, people’s everyday lives were governed through the urban work units (*danwei*) and rural communes (*gongshe*). These two institutions regulated the daily lives of Chinese citizens during Mao’s period of high socialism. State officials and cadres surveyed these areas and the household registration (*hukou*) system kept people in place. There was little room to move during this time; the state was always watching.

Gradually the state has let go of its overall control of people in favor of more indirect methods of surveillance and guiding China’s large population. The reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s contributed to greater freedom in the marketplace. Deng Xiaoping intensified these reforms in the early 1990s with his famous ‘southern tour’ where the market took on a new form of governance where the state could “govern certain subjects from a distance, by relying on their individual choices, aspirations or capacities” (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009: 6). In this case, the Chinese state relied upon the market to offer choices to individuals in order to tap into individual desires, thereby governing from a distance. As we will see throughout the dissertation, the retail economy
for rice has intensified over the past decade, giving consumers a wider choice of food products to consume in the market.

*The Economy of Quality Food*

Chapter 2 discusses the application of theories of commodity studies and political-cultural economy of agro-food systems. Many studies of commodities follow the path of commodities as they travel through globalization, from one part of the world to another (Mintz 1986; Friedlberg 2004; Foster 2008). However, a recent trend in commodity chains in developed countries has followed ‘alternative food networks’—meaning organic or local food systems—from production to consumption (Goodman 1999; Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Guthman 2002). Within these discussions, ideas of quality food emerge; questions consist of: what is quality food? How is quality food different than other foods? Who decides whether the food is quality? (Goodman 2003).

My study breaks away from these themes by looking specifically at the case of China. While instances of globalization and foreign influence (explicitly addressed in Chapter 5) have certainly affected China and the commodity network of northeast rice, I focus on the domestic Chinese processes that have instigated and enabled the growth of this commodity grain. In doing so, I examine the social processes in China that are creating Chinese consumers.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapters 1 and 2 make up the first part of this dissertation: Introductions. Chapter 2 is the chapter where I bring together theories of culture, politics, and economy through
commodity studies and studies of agro-food systems. In doing so, I explore the use and connotations of terms such as ‘political economy,’ ‘cultural economy,’ and ‘cultural political economy’ as applied to commodities. This chapter examines how these terms have been applied and used in the context of agro-food systems, such as commodity chains and commodity networks. Throughout the chapter I explore and build the ways that cultural economy has been applied to understanding cultural, political and economic processes in China. The contribution I make in this chapter is to connect the ways that commodities in China are linked with broader notions of citizenship. I conclude this chapter with my own understanding of cultural economy as it applies to and guides this particular research project.

Following the first two chapters, this dissertation is divided into two more parts. Part II of this dissertation examines the national context of rice production and consumption. The chapter included in this part investigates rice breeding technology and the development of a consumer society in China. Projects at either end of the production-consumption dichotomy include the development of an urban consumer society and efforts to produce high quality grain correspond with China’s effort as a nation to get ahead in the world through improving the quality of the population through the goods they consume or in agricultural technology. These two projects, in part driven by consumers but also enabled by the state, relate to the processes of rice production and consumption that will be further investigated in Part III, the case study of northeast rice. The themes that emerge from Chapter 3 are the role of the state in directing and administering these projects and the way that ‘quality’ has emerged as a concept associated with modernization. The message I convey in this chapter is that the Chinese
state has carefully constructed a social environment where ‘quality’ is an ideal that
everyone can achieve. While the state has visibly retreated from its over-bearing
presence in daily life from the Maoist era, today its presence is more diffuse.

As China has embraced the global capitalist economy, a strong consumer society
is burgeoning in major urban centers. In addition to examining the development of
consumer culture in China, this chapter also outlines the development of the ways that the
Chinese state has simultaneously imagined the connections between bodies and
modernity. For example, in the Mao era, the state utilized bodies as a way to participate
in China’s modernization process through production in the industrial and agricultural
sectors. Today, through the discourse of suzhi, Chinese citizens are encouraged to
participate in China’s modernization process through their involvement in the retail
economy and consumption practices. In addition to promoting the discourse of human
quality as well as promoting quality products in the economy, the state maintains control
over the direction of rice breeding activities. I examine the ways that rice breeding has
followed priorities of the state, from efforts to produce mass quantities of rice through
hybrid rice to more recent trends in focusing on the technology to produce higher quality
rice. Moreover, this chapter examines Chinese state policies and trends that suggest a
priority shift from high quantities of rice and grain to high quality grain. The aim of this
chapter, then, is to follow the ways that state priorities for grain production have
influenced the market for grain.

Part III of this dissertation examines the commodity network of northeast rice.
Given what is occurring at the national scale in urban areas and in rice breeding
institutions that have been covered in Part II, this third part of the dissertation focuses
specifically on the commodity of northeast rice. For reasons outlined above, I am adopting the term cultural economy to explain the ways that this commodity grain is embedded in cultural and economic activities in China and specifically the northeast. While I maintain that activities occurring throughout China (i.e. the development of an urban consumer society concerned with quality and rice breeding efforts to advance the quality of grains) are enabling northeast rice to flourish on the consumer market, this commodity network is specific to the northeast of China where the bulk of my research took place. For that reason, I have divided the chapters that focus on the case study of northeast rice into three distinct parts of cultural economy: spaces, economies, and cultures.

Chapter 4 examines the history and current state of agricultural production in China’s northeast region as it has transitioned from an almost barren frontier to one of China’s largest grain producing regions. This chapter looks at the unique history of Northeast China, specifically with its relations to other Northeast Asian nations. In particular, the Japanese and Koreans have played an integral role in bringing rice production to the Northeast of China. Still today, they maintain a strong presence in this region, especially the ethnic Korean Chinese in the region. This cultural and political history plays a vital role in the development of the commodity of northeast rice, as does the ecological setting of the area.

In Chapter 5, I consider the ways that economies are structured around Northeast rice production and consumption. In particular, I examine the changes that important structures in the commodity network of northeast rice have transitioned from the socialist to a retail economy. The state maintains a strong role in the economy, despite the
appearance of a retail market economy. In fact, as I examine throughout the chapter, an informal, market-based economy centered on northeast rice has emerged. Although many state-owned and private companies operate in the northeast rice economy, spaces exist for private entrepreneurs to create businesses buying and selling rice. These two contrasting elements of a formal and an informal economy exist side-by-side and work together to show how ‘private’ the rice economy has become after being dominated by the state for decades.

While Chapter 5 examines the practices of economies of the commodity network of northeast rice, Chapter 6 examines the cultures involved in this network. This chapter uses an understanding of culture as everyday practice to examine the politics of rice consumption in China. Throughout the chapter, I assert that practices surrounding rice production and consumption vary dramatically and, although China prides itself on its long traditional rice culture, today’s eating practices are quite different, as urban consumers seek to differentiate themselves. Throughout the chapters, I explore both the ways that consumers buy rice in stores based on in-store consumer surveys as well as the actions that people are taking surrounding how they eat rice outside the realm of the retail economy based on observations and conversations about eating habits in Chinese culture.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by returning to the idea that northeast rice has become a commodity. As rice moves from being a staple food product in Chinese society to a commodity where consumers are free to pick and choose how and what they eat, consumption practices are changing. Moreover, as the Chinese state shifts its goals to producing higher quality grains and becomes less involved in the grain economy, it continues to assert its power and control using innovative and less direct
methods and technologies of control. This chapter returns to the themes of food security, Chinese state governance, and the economy of quality food.
Chapter 2

Commodity Networks:
Conceptualizing Culture, Economy, and Politics

Throughout the northeast of China, rice sits on supermarket shelves in bags and in bins in grain and oil stalls and stores waiting for consumers to purchase it, take it home and cook it in a rice maker for the family. Each bag of rice is carefully labeled as Dongbei or Wuchang rice. Some have a special mark or label of ‘high quality’ (gao zhiliang) stamped on the bag. Others even had a ‘green food’ label, signaling that it was produced in a way that minimized the application of chemical inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers. In the open bins, consumers stop to look, feel, and smell the low-priced rice. The rice in the bins, although still dongbei rice, is a more generic version of some of the higher quality varieties of northeast rice. This rice tends to be cheaper than the rice bought in bags with quality or green food labels. These displays of rice offer a selection to consumers that is meant to entice and attract consumers. Labels such as ‘northeast,’ ‘quality,’ or ‘green’ indicate that this rice is valued. Insight into the aspects of production and distribution of this rice indicate that a number of factors have gone into the production of this rice to place it on supermarket shelves and associate this product with quality and value. It also suggests the development of consumer culture in China.
Rice farmers in the northeast operate through contracts with rice companies in the region. At the beginning of the season, rice farmers purchase selected seeds to plant in their fields. Farmers in the northeast tend to have about 10 times as much land to work on as farmers in southern China where the average farm size is .32 acres or .13 hectares whereas in Heilongjiang, the average farm size is 3-5 acres per household (Karhl et al. 2005). Many families have income outside of farming, so they have the means to hire other farmers to work by planting and tending to the rice on their fields. Rural families maintain use rights to the land, but given changes in northeast production practices over the past few decades, large companies have emerged to take over most of the production practices. While these companies do not technically own the land or operate the production practices, they have the ability to control the means of production through offering incentives, technical extension, and seeds developed through research in China’s large agricultural science bureaucratic system.

Growers in the northeast are organized through the rice companies that operate mills and other factors of vertical production practices. Farmers who contract with these companies are guaranteed a premium for the rice they grow and sell back to these mills because they are ensured that they will receive quality seeds which will produce quality rice. Moreover, the contracts they sign with the companies early in the production season reduces the risk that rice farmers face. In the northeast of China, the window of time required to grow the rice just about equals the number of days that the cold, harsh climate can support rice production\(^7\). Working within these constraints of a short and specific growing season, northeast rice farmers face a high amount of natural risk. By signing a

---

\(^7\) Because of this short time frame, risk persists; the season was disrupted in the 2010 growing season when a late season frost destroyed much of the northeast’s rice crop.
contract, however, they set an agreement with the companies that they will receive a portion of earnings at the end of the season regardless of what they produce.

At the end of the growing season, farmers bring their seeds to the processing mills owned and operated by the rice companies to sell back the grain their seeds yielded for profit. Mill operators weigh the yields, separate the grain based on the variety of seeds they came from, and begin the milling process. The milling process consists of removing the grain from the husks, and ending with polished, shiny translucent white grains that fill large (50 kg) bags to be shipped to distribution centers, wholesale markets, and directly to supermarkets. At these distribution centers, the rice is sold to middlemen who distribute the rice to local (meaning within Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces) grain and oil stores. At a wholesale market in Harbin, large bags of rice grown within Heilongjiang province are sold and shipped to grain suppliers around the country. Through these middlemen, the rice ends up in supermarkets and grain stores throughout China.

The scenario outlined above provides brief insight into the processes under which northeast rice is produced, processed, and distributed to make it available on supermarket shelves throughout China. We can understand the labor practices and farm/farmworker organization that enables rice to grow in the fields and end up on supermarket shelves across China. This perspective where a scholar traces the roots of food production stems from commodity chains of agriculture. Since the 1980s, the commodity chain has appeared as a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tool used to uncover and understand the social relations of production that are hidden behind the commodities we consume. While a commodity chain or commodity system analysis can be applied to a number of commodities, I focus on agricultural commodities. The work on agricultural
commodity chains in the 1980s suggested that a look into the production and labor practices would reveal the hidden labor practices in a given commodity (Buttel 1980; Friedland 1984). Friedland’s (1984) commodity system analysis was the first attempt to organize a methodology around the studies of commodities. His methodology included in-depth analysis of the following five factors: 1) production practices, 2) grower organization, 3) labor as a factor of production, 4) scientific production and application, and 5) marketing and distribution networks. Such a methodology was rooted in Marxist political economic theory and sought to uncover the hidden social relations in food.

However, this analysis leaves us with several unanswered questions: Why do the supermarkets and grain suppliers want rice that comes from the northeast? Why will consumers purchase rice that is labeled northeast rice? What distinguishes northeast rice—both materially and symbolically—from rice grown in other regions of China? Why, in short, is northeast rice valuable? In a commodity chain analysis, consumers are driven to make consumption choices based on larger structural forces (Goodman and Redclift 1991). For example, Mintz’s (1985) study of sugar production and consumption practices reflects the idea that food is a product of changing class structures due to the industrial workforce. Changing class relationships enabled the working class to consume sugar; eating this sugar was simply a reflection of these larger political economic forces. In such a commodity chain analysis, the consumer does not possess individual agency to act on his or her own. With new cultural approaches to consumption gaining attention, food systems theorists attempt to incorporate cultural perspectives into food systems (Goodman 1999; Marsden and Arce 1995; Fine et al. 1996). While a commodity chain analysis is useful in many ways, it is limited in understanding the complex role of the
individual consumer. As Foster (2006) notes, “tracking commodities and value in motion now requires far greater attention to culture – the transformation, manipulation, and movement of meanings” (288).

Reformulating the role of the consumer in the capitalist economy is central to attempts to modify traditional commodity chain approaches to include ‘culture.’ In her study in the rise of organic milk in response to consumer fears of the hormone rBGH in conventional milk, Melanie DuPuis (2000; 2002) describes what she sees as the ‘reflexive consumer.’ This reflexive consumer approach provides a framework where the consumer is understood as a complex, politically active and aware human being who makes consumption choices based on his or her own understand and evaluation of claims made about certain foods. DuPuis’s framework is best summed up as:

the concept of reflexive consumption provides a lens that enables us to see the politics in consumptive activities. In social constructivist fashion, reflexive consumption moves our search for power away from the consumer’s consciousness to the discourse surrounding the consumer in the world in which she or he acts” (2000: 291).

This framework allows for the consumer to be a part of the discourses of the surrounding world. In the case of Chinese rice, consumers are not making political decisions based on the rice they consume; however, consumers are a part of the world that surrounds them where concepts of quality surround the choices they make. With the discourse of suzhi—described in detail in the following chapter—I argue that this case indicates the ways that consumption is becoming a part of citizen-making in China. Chinese are no longer expected simply to work in industry and agriculture to be a citizen of modern China, but they are lured into participating in the market through their consumption habits. Thus, I argue that the commodity of northeast rice is part of the process of making consumer-
Throughout this chapter, I argue how and why ‘cultural economy’ and ‘commodity networks’ add essential pieces of the cultural understanding of consumers to the story of northeast rice that a commodity chain analysis would overlook. I begin this chapter by looking at how the concept of ‘culture’ is conceptualized. This first section calls for a perspective of culture that fits into the practices of everyday life, particularly on the topics of culture as politics and the body. In doing so, we can understand eating and other everyday practices as political and cultural acts (de Certeau 1984). I then bring these perspectives of the economy and culture together through the work of commodity systems, particularly those that study food and agricultural products. Finally, I provide the theoretical grounding for this dissertation, which I call the cultural economy of quality food.

**Conceptualizing Culture**

In the Chinese culture, the whole process of preparing food from raw ingredients to morsels ready for the mouth involves a complex of interrelated variables that is highly distinctive when compared with other food traditions of major magnitude. At the base of this complex is the division between fan, grains and other starch food, and ts’ai, vegetables and meat dishes. To prepare a balanced meal, it must have an appropriate amount of both fan and ts’ai, and ingredients are readied along both tracks (Chang 1977: 7).

Northeast China was occupied until recently by Tungus-speaking and other non-Han peoples. Much of it is mountain country…Its center consists of wide river plains, grass, and marshland. These are now cultivated, maize and sorghum being among the main crops…The northeast was a marginal area through much of China’s history (Anderson 1988: 3)

South China is the great domain of rice (Anderson 1988: 4).
K.C. Chang’s (1977) *Food in Chinese Culture* and E. N. Anderson’s (1988) *The Food of China* are perhaps the most often cited and authoritative works on the cultural and anthropological aspects of Chinese food. They each came out in the early reform era, as researchers were just beginning to be allowed in China. These books make several assertions that I will explore in this chapter. The first of these is that *fan* and *ts’ai (cai)* are prepared and proportioned equally in a meal. The second, that I explored in Chapter 4, is that Southern China has a thriving rice culture which the North and Northeast lack because the South is where the majority of rice is grown. Finally, I problematize the ways that Chang and Anderson conceptualize ‘culture.’ Certainly, they are from a different generation of anthropologists than the ones that are researching food culture today.

I chose these quotes to begin this section because they highlight the ways that Chinese culture and food are lumped together in an over-generalized and over-simplified manner. These are narratives that not only Western anthropologists convey, but that Chinese use to talk about themselves as a group of people. Chang and Anderson have over-generalized ideas about how culture informs behavior. Both of these authors assume that culture is static and that eating practices represent a people’s culture. In the quotes displayed above, Chang assumes that all Chinese meals are prepared with ideas of balance between *fan* and *cai*. Through this reading, readers expect that all or most meals prepared and served in all of China are performed with this balance in mind. While Anderson also perpetuates such ideas about eating, he also discusses how southern China is the ‘great domain’ of rice; most of China’s rice is produced and consumed in that region. In Anderson’s regional break-up of China’s agricultural regions, the areas where
staple products are grown are also the areas where they are consumed. This conception of food and agriculture suggests that China’s regions are bounded and isolated.

Indeed, twenty or thirty years ago China’s regions were much more isolated from one another than they are today. Transportations costs were much higher and markets had yet to develop regional specialties. Supermarkets had yet to be introduced, so there was little opportunity to shop for ‘universal’ goods. Yet, interestingly, as supermarkets have appeared throughout urban China offering similar goods to Beijing consumers that Kunming consumers can choose, the choices that people make become more fragmented and diverse. With the introduction of China’s neoliberal policies, citizens have a plethora of market choices that affect something as basic as their everyday eating practices.

Consumer choice in China is affected by a variety of different choices and practices. Many of these practices, as I argue throughout this dissertation, are political choices that affect the daily practices of individual consumers.

When I began this project, I was aware that the dominant narrative was that rice comes from the south and wheat comes from the north and that Chinese meals are conceived with the idea of the balance of fan and cai. However, I did not think those concepts would play into my research as largely as they did. What I found when I was doing my research was that there was no single response about the grains that people prefer. When asked about their personal preferences, some people would tell me what they prefer and what their family prefers, but many times, people would try to tell me about all of China. They told me these same perceptions about where rice is grown and where wheat is grown. Some even got the narrative backwards. I attempted to ask people about themselves and their own preferences, but some respondents answered for
the nation. As usual in conducting ethnographic research, my results were messy, conflicting, and contradictory. In this section I discuss the different ways that culture has been theorized and used in the social sciences and particularly in geography. This chapter broadly explores how bodies interact with ideals of the economy and the nation through the interactions individuals have among themselves and northeast rice. With my understanding of culture being informed by recent works in cultural geography, I argue in this chapter that culture should be viewed as political and as manifested in individual bodies where the symbolic and material meet. Moreover, in the context of China politics collides with bodies to create citizenship.

Culture as Politics

Over the past few decades geographers have debated the way that culture is understood and used as a tool for analysis in geographical works. This debate has been central and ongoing to the sub-discipline of geography. Beginning in the 1970s, when Clifford Geertz (1973) used culture not as a thing to be analyzed, but emphasized the importance of the symbolic as it relates to culture and cultural change. Geertz’s concern lay with how those who study culture could unravel ‘webs of meaning,’ understand how they were constructed and formed, and to interpret them (1973). Cultural materialists in the 1980s, taking Geertz’s conception of culture into consideration, began to understand culture as a site of struggle. Raymond Williams' (1983) examination of the historical uses of culture reveals the tensions and complexity of the term. Culture tends to take on different meanings depending on the politics and place of the person using it. This complexity appeals to Williams because for him, language isn't just a reflection of
society, but is a medium through which people create meaning. Social change itself is in some ways constituted by language.

The cultural materialists saw culture as ordinary and everyday. Peter Jackson (1989) applied a spatial perspective to this interpretation of culture as everyday. For Jackson, space isn't neutral, but it is political and invested with meaning. Space is constituted through social relations and constitutive of social relations. Massey (1994), building on this understanding of space, argues for a wider notion of spatiality as the product of intersecting social relations. Bringing feminism into the debate, Massey argues that challenging traditional conceptions of space also challenges dominant social relations, power, and gender definitions.

_Culture as Bodies_

Following Massey’s work, the body, as a site of struggle between individual and nation (or society or economy), is a scale to which feminist geographers are increasingly turning (McDowell 1999). Understanding social and cultural changes through the body represents change in spatial scales; the body is now considered a scale of analysis. As geographers seek to move beyond structural analyses of place and scale, the body “is constructed through public discourse and practices that occur at a variety of spatial scales….spatial divisions - whether in the home or in the workplace, at the level of the city or the nation-state – are also affected by and reflected in embodied practices and lived experiences” (McDowell 1999: 35). Drawing on Mary Douglas’s work, the body represents both the social order and the self (1966). However, according to Judith Butler, the body represents the material and the symbolic; bodies are not simply passive objects,
but they are also a construct of their cultural surroundings. Butler (1990) writes that for so long, bodies were considered a “passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body, however, ought to question ‘the body’ as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse” (Butler 1990: 164).

The body, then, becomes a site where social acts are performed through everyday life (Butler 1993; Lock and Farquhar 2007). The act of food consumption is a process that is literally embodied. Guthman and DuPuis (2006) see what they have termed the “dialectic of dialectics” where contradictions of economy and culture mutually feed off one another. These ambiguities reinforce the other and can be seen as the contradictions of neoliberalism, through which the evidence of the complexities and contradictions are made visible when examined through the body. Culture and economy work with and against one another in distinct ways; these differences are manifested throughout the performances of individuals. The economy is based on rational decisions, whereas culture informs daily practices and social interactions. At the scale of the body, we can observe and experience the interactions and contradictions through which rational economic and practical cultural decisions are made (Guthman and DuPuis 2006).

Culture as Citizenship

‘Citizenship’ ascribes individual bodies to political systems. When one is a citizen of a certain country, that person is expected to follow the laws that govern that society. Yet, they are also entitled to certain rights of that country and are expected to ensue the duties that accompany these rights. As I discuss in Chapter 3, the Chinese state
once heavily controlled and policed the everyday lives of Chinese citizens to ensure individuals were living up to the standards the CCP had set for citizenship. With the introduction of neoliberal state policies, these state controls are no longer direct; rather, the state seeks to govern individuals indirectly through individual ideals and desires that the market can provide.

In China, bodies are politicized subjects of the state (Anagnost 2004). Especially in the context of the discourse of *suzhi*, the Chinese state disciplines bodies to be moral citizens, to control the nation’s population, and to be consumers in the new economy. Bodies are also cultivated to become citizens through consumption. In fact, as Cartier describes, the reforms that Chinese cities have undergone have created “new urban landscapes for emerging consumer-citizen subjectivity” (Cartier 2010: 374). The introduction of urban comforts such as private supermarkets and housing markets has created an urban environment where bodies accumulate status and value through their participation in the market economy. Moreover, by participating in the private market, individuals execute their own choices and rights, but do so through the market which is directly influenced by the state. These rights and choices are informed not only by political influence, but are also the result of China’s long-standing cultural traditions. The discourse of *suzhi* fits within China’s large modernization program. In the words of Tamara Jacka:

[Suzhi] intersects with, and contains powerful traces of, other keywords, such as civilization and modernity, whose histories are long and fraught and entangled with developments across languages and cultures. Laden as it is with cultural and historical associations, *suzhi* is of critical importance to contemporary China’s booming, globally oriented market economy and to new, “postsocialist” forms of state governance and social control. It plays a central role in contemporary processes of citizenship, simultaneously contributing to understandings of the responsibilities,
obligations, claims, and rights that connect members of society to the state; to determinations of which individuals and social groups are included in this set of rights and responsibilities and which are excluded; to discourses on how to produce the “ideal” citizen as well as what to do about the less-than-ideal citizen; and to processes and institutions that produce and reproduce boundaries and gradations between different types of citizenship and citizen (2009: 524).

Suzhi has moved away from simply meaning that a person has characteristics of quality that are natured and nurtured, but it has become intertwined with ideas of citizenship and status in China’s new system of social order.

Rice production and consumption are indeed a large part of Chinese history and tradition. Because rice is so engrained in citizens, citizens hold some symbolic value to the rice that they interact with. In China, Brownell’s (1995) concept of ‘body culture’ refers to daily practices such as health, hygiene, fitness, beauty, dress as well as gestures, postures, manners, speaking, and eating. Body culture is cultivated and constructed by one’s surroundings and habitation. Given that individuals make their own decisions about their bodies, I argue that these decisions are indirectly guided by the state, through the market economy and the state’s ability to both establish and adhere to social norms. In the case of rice, these decisions individuals make emerge through their consumptions patterns regarding their bodies and the food they purchase.

**Commodity Studies**

Marx has inspired the idea of studying commodities to understand the masked social relations that go into the production of goods. Marx used commodity fetishism to understand how social relationships between people in a capitalist society were mediated and transformed into objectified relationships between things like commodities and
money. In capitalist societies, economies are based on the production of commodities by means of commodities; this is in contrast with pre-capitalist, traditional societies where commerce was restricted and social relationships were built between people when transactions occurred. Commodity fetishism veils the social relations of production through the consumption of a commodity. In other words, in capitalist societies the values of products exchanged in markets are subject to a number of factors and the worker who produced the commodity ultimately loses control over what happens to his product once it enters the market.

The commodification of objects is a culturally determined practice where certain social spaces find a commodity to have symbolic value that exceeds its exchange value. Commodification occurs when a product gains value other than its ‘pure’ economic value and expands into market trade where objects had not been previously traded. Appadurai’s (1986) ‘The Social Life of Things’ illustrates how the value of objects is made up by its symbolic value as it becomes recognized as a commodity. This value is formed and shaped through the spaces and social processes within which a commodity interacts. Appadurai not only brought attention to the value of commodities, but in doing so he dismantled Marx’s distinction between traditional modes of production with transparent non-market power relations and the capitalist mode of production with veiled market relationships. By tracing the ‘social life’ of commodities, Appadurai sees that exchange relationships are complex integration of use and exchange value that problematizes the commodity fetish as a veil (Goodman and Dupuis 2002). In short, Appadurai argues pre-capitalist and capitalist markets are not as distinct as Marx made them. Through his
understanding, consumption practices can always change society no matter what the economic setting.

In most analyses of economy (outside anthropology), the meaning of the term commodity has narrowed to reflect only one part of the heritage of Marx and early political economists. That is, in most contemporary uses, commodities are special kinds of manufactured goods (or services), which are associated only with capitalist modes of production and are thus found only where capitalism has penetrated. Commodities are generally seen as typical material representations of the capitalist mode of production (Appadurai 1986: 7).

With the case of high quality rice in China, the concept of ‘quality’ drives the value of this rice in a society where quality has become a key concept promoted by the state to drive China’s modernization process. In approaching the commodity network for high quality rice, I examine the ways that science, society, the state, and the economy have merged to further develop the market for quality rice.

*Integrating Commodity Studies into the Sociology of Agriculture*

In the 1970s, the field of rural sociology developed as an academic discipline. Although rural sociology did cover issues outside of agriculture, agriculture was its main concern. The field was propelled by the work of Frederick Buttel and William Friedland. One of the main contributions to the study of agro-food systems was Friedland’s (1984) commodity system analysis. After years of writing about commodities from the California sunbelt (lettuce, tomatoes, grapes), Friedland developed a system of analysis to be used for studying and understanding the main political economic processes through which agriculture travels from field to store. His model attempts to generate a greater understanding of the processes through which food travels from field to store. Seemingly absent from his model is the role that consumers play in this chain. Much of this work
was pioneered by William Friedland’s commodity system analysis (1984). This model is meant to generate a greater understanding of the processes through which food travels from field to store through a Marxist political economy approach. Friedland uses five different foci through which to understand the commodity chain: production practices, grower organization, labor as a factor in production, scientific production and application, and marketing and distribution systems. Examples of lettuce, tomatoes, and grapes illustrate how a commodity systems approach can be methodologically analytical. While he advocates for the application of this model, Friedland recognizes the limitations of his approach, noting that a commodity system is not definitive of the sociology of agriculture, that he has focused on products from the Sunbelt, and warns readers to be alert to reification and institutionalization that happens throughout the chain. Focused in the United States, this commodity chain was to be used to understand a single commodity, rather than focus primarily on the exploitation of the farmers in the developing worlds, as was the case of peasant studies. This political economy perspective was advanced by Ben Fine’s (1994) system of provision which seeks to understand the connections of political economic practices. Attempting to further the idea of a commodity system analysis, Fine (1994) makes the case for a ‘system of provision’ as a “chain of activities connecting initial production to final consumption.” This system, he argues, is central to the notion of studying food systems because there are a sequence of distinct events that are structurally bound into other economic activities such as transportation, shopping, and labor, and that are connected to international and political factors. The study of global commodity chains has increased dramatically over the past few decades as global trade has increased (Foster 2006). While northeast Chinese rice
has increased and certainly has ties to global trade (especially Korea and Japan—see Chapter 5), my study of this commodity remains limited to China. Understanding state political, economic, and cultural forces, allows me to recognize the complex relationships that are formed between the commodity and consumers with regards to Chinese state citizenship.

**Cultural Economy of Food Systems**

By highlighting the construction of qualitative value, the circuits of culture approach both unites economy and culture within a single analytical framework and defines a point of intersection between current work in cultural/economic geography and rural sociology, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other (Foster 2006: 291).

In an effort to incorporate the cultural implications of food consumption into the commodity chain, Dixon (1999) proposes a cultural economy model for agro-food systems, critiquing CSA for understanding consumption as a political economic process. This approach furthers Friedland’s CSA by interrogating the key relationships (and interrelationships) between the economy, social identity, and politics. While Friedland’s CSA was limited to the political economy of production and distribution, Dixon extends this model by inserting culture, consumption, and the role of social identity. Since the publication of Dixon’s model, the field of agro-food studies has witnessed an influx of work to integrate the political economy of production with the cultural practices of consumption. Within this context, Dixon’s model has caught the attention of leading agro-food scholars. Notably, in *French Beans and Food Scares*, Friedberg (2004) uses a cultural economy model to analyze the commodity networks between post-colonial producers and European consumers. The book traces commodities from points of
production to consumption, noting the historical similarities between the anglo- and francophone networks. While the cultural economy is evident in this network because of these distinctions, it follows the model that Dixon proposed by adding culture and consumption to the political economy of production. Dixon finds an understanding of cultural economy as an extension of a commodity chain. This basis of cultural economy elides social theoretical steps taken outside of agro-food systems to develop cultural economy not as a model, but as an interrogation into the organization of society and economy. The assumption that cultural economy is a model that can replace a commodity chain analysis can lead to problematic over-use of the term.

Many other works in agro-food studies refer to Dixon’s cultural economy as a step to launch into their own work. Whether studying commodities (Guthman 2002), consumers’ roles in understanding where food comes from (Goodman and DuPuis 2002), or developing a nuanced understanding of consumption within a neoliberalism (Guthman and DuPuis 2006), recent works in agro-food studies certainly reflect and further theoretical developments about the organization of society and the economy. In a general sense, these studies recognize that problem with the CSA political economy model is not that it simply lacks a cultural component to food consumption, but that it assumes the political economic forces driving production from a supply-side approach; there is little interaction between producers and consumers. Together, these studies all work towards developing a more comprehensive understanding of production and consumption. What these studies lack, however, is an interrogation of what constitutes cultural economy, although they continue to draw on cultural economy as if it has a stable, coherent meaning.
While Dixon’s model validates a methodological use of cultural economy in agro-food systems, the term warrants further theoretical development. Recent works in the social sciences, particularly geography, reflect theoretical arguments about the organization of society and the economy (Ash and Thrift 2004; Castree 2004; DuGay and Pryke 2002; Ray and Sayer 1999). Indeed, the relationship between culture and economy is awkward (McDowell 2000). In the work on agro-food systems, this relationship is interrogated, whether it is in studying commodities (Guthman 2002), consumers’ roles in understanding where food comes from (Goodman and DuPuis 2002), or developing a nuanced understanding of consumption within a neoliberalism (Guthman and DuPuis 2006). These studies recognize that the CSA political economy model not only lacks a cultural component to food consumption, but that it assumes the political economic forces driving production stem from a supply-side approach; there is little interaction between producers and consumers. Together, these studies all work towards a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the dichotomies between production and consumption and culture and economy.

Within economic geography and human geography where cultural economy is used more broadly, the cultural turn in the 1990s has profoundly impacted the way geographers view the ‘economy’ (Barnes 2003; Crang 1997). However, to say that economic geographers take ‘culture’ into account in their analyses misses the point that cultural economy presents a new epistemological view of society and economy. The use of cultural economy must be understood in the greater context of the cultural turn where Marxist political economy began to merge with Marxist cultural studies. Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school of the 1980s brought a Gramscian ‘cultural hegemony’ back into
an understanding of society (see Hall 1980). Society was not only considered a product of its political economic surroundings, but also of a dominant set of everyday practices and beliefs set and maintained by the dominating class. The idea that meanings, ideas, and practices of everyday life were discursive formations to be deconstructed emerged from this understanding of class and culture. Coupled with the realization that economic development was not fulfilling its promises of enhanced growth, greater prosperity, and high qualities of life, economic geographers critically engaged in how ‘the economy’ and ‘capitalism’ had been understood. Perhaps the most radical critique comes from Gibson-Graham (1996), arguing against totalizing and hegemonic views of global capitalism while deconstructing the discourse of capitalism to create alternatives to the capitalist economy. Although Gibson-Graham do not discuss cultural economy directly, they open discussion for a re-thinking of what we have taken for granted as the ‘economy.’ Their post-structuralist approach to the economy allows us to see the compartmentalized functions of society and economy.

Gibson-Graham set up the basis for a construction of cultural economy where the relationship of culture and economy is not the subject of inquiry (Castree 2004), but rather, it is the idea of what this cultural economy might look like that is worthy of investigation. As du Gay and Pryke (2002) assert, culture and economy are descriptive words that we use in everyday life to explain the organization of society. “Doing economics means acting on the assumption of a determinate nature waiting to be described and calculated about by a neutral observation language; doing ‘cultural economy’ means acting on the assumption that economics are performed and enacted by the very discourses of which they are supposedly the cause” (6). To recognize a cultural
economy would be to deconstruct the meaning of the ‘economy,’ while simultaneously acknowledging that the ‘economy’ exists in everyday life. To ‘do’ cultural economy as outlined below begins with the recognition that the economy itself is a discourse that organizes the structure of society.

Cultural economy traces the development and flows of the discursive and material organization of ‘the economy.’ A compelling example comes from Peter Jackson’s (2002) exploration of commercial culture. Through examining economies, practices, and spaces of commercial culture, Jackson challenges dualistic thinking that separates production from consumption, local from global, and culture from economy through a focus on circuits and networks. Through a critique of the linear and simplistic commodity chain, Jackson draws from Actor Network Theory (ANT) to propose a disjointed and non-continuous circuit of commodities. Such an approach highlights the complexities of products with global ties. Commodity chain approaches to agro-food systems attempt to understand how the production and consumption of food are translated (Callon 1986) to assign each actor a specific role (as scientist, producer, consumer, etc.). However, this chain-like method does not recognize the multiple roles that each actor can play (for example, as both producer and consumer). Drawing from ANT, a commodity network not only recognizes the interconnectedness of all actors, but it also calls attention to the role that non-human actors can play in a network (Whatmore 1994). For example, in food systems, material factors such as the soil, climate, seeds, and disease all have the potential to impact the factors through which rice is produced and consumed. A commodity network thus recognizes the influence that actors such as scientists, producers, consumers, the climate, seeds, the environment, etc. all have on the network.
Inherent in cultural economy is that idea of a commodity network or circuit, as Jackson argues, rather than a linear chain (2002). In short, cultural economy is a non-linear network-based assemblage of actors and commodities. Within a cultural economy, people and commodities continue to shape one another and form notions of value at various nodes throughout the overall circuit.

Quality as Governmentalizing Force

This discussion of cultural economy highlights the interactions between culture and consumers. Inherent in this discussion is the idea that culture is political; I discussed above the ways that citizenship is emerging in new ways through consumerism. In China, consumerism leads to new forms of citizenship connecting citizens to the state. These are based on who has access to markets and how consumers are attempting to shape those markets. If culture is a process that is politically engineered, then we can understand cultural economy as cultural political economy. The political, in this sense, is much less direct form of political control than in China’s past. It is much less a state control of resources and their distribution that is in China’s recent past, but is instead found in the ways that the Chinese state is governing and managing the economy. As I discuss in the next chapter, governance and control in China is much less direct now as the Chinese state attempts to govern citizens through the market. In this particular case of northeast rice, the state is guiding both society and economy in similar yet distinct ways through the discourse and ideas of quality people and quality food. While the specifics of how the Chinese state is governing from afar through quality will be
discussed in the next chapter, here I focus on the ways that quality is used to guide and
direct the market.

While, as I demonstrated above, the literature on cultural economy has flourished
over the past decade, so has the literature on governmentality. Inherent in these ideas of
governemntality is the indirect ways that govenments are shifting their modes of
governance to indirect methods. Instead of directly guiding the population through
economic policies and practices once associated with the welfare state, the state has
moved to indirectly guiding society through the market. By doing so, they are helping to
create the means of desires to participate in a market economy. By reaching out and
attempting to form consumer desires, the state is essentially guiding everyday cultural
practices in contemporary society.

Through this process of governing from afar and through the market, we see new
forms of citizenship emerging. No longer are citizens recognized as those participating in
and receiving government assistance and subsidies, but we can recognize citizens as
those aware citizens who emerge and adhere to a new set of state policies and goals that
are less directly stated. Instead, they follow the unspoken guidelines and examples of the
state by participating in market economies. This process of recognizing that larger
political forces shape everyday practices recognizes the complex role that governments
play in shaping culture. Moreover, within the market economy, products are created and
developed to meet and exceed consumer expectations. These products—often deemed as
quality—demand a higher economic and cultural value in the market. Keeping in mind
that many consumer practices are shaped by broader political forces, I turn to a
A discussion of cultural political economy to recognize that the ‘cultural’ in cultural political economy is inherently political.

A Cultural Political Economy of Quality Food

Quality food, as constituted in a variety of ways, plays a key role in shaping the interactions that occur between people and food. Ideas of quality maintain certain relationships to the life of a commodity where, when an established group of producers, marketers, consumers, regulators, etc. agree the product has achieved a certain level of quality, it has the ability to raise the demand or price for this product. For example, because alternative food networks (AFNs) embody an ideal that works against the industrial food system in developed, Western countries, AFNs are growing in popularity (Goodman 2003). Food within these alternative markets includes crops that are produced locally, organically, and do not include genetically-modified seeds. The connections between AFNs and quality food tend to come from the connections that consumers think they have to the food when they know where it comes from (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). AFNs in Western countries are generally considered to produce ‘quality’ food where ‘nature’ is embedded in food which reflects consumer concern with industrial agricultural production (Goodman 1999; Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Murdoch, et al. 2000). However, as the regulation of organic standards in the US shows, strict standards of product quality opens space for others to work around the regulations (Guthman 2007). In a less regulated environment, as demonstrated below with japonica rice in China, the powers that decide what constitutes quality are diffuse. The idea of northeast rice as quality is generally accepted within Chinese society.
The quality of a food product is constantly made and re-made through practices and the organization of the market. A ‘geography of quality’ shows how different actors in the production of food can insert different definitions of quality. This process can make new forms of production and consumption which emphasize quality possible (Mansfield 2003). Understanding the ‘economy of qualities’ leads to ‘hybrid’ forms of the traditional organization of the economy (Callon et al. 2002). The economy is not simply about supply and demand, but is shaped by specific cultural conditions that project ‘quality’ on a product. Callon et al.’s concern is with the active and reflexive role of economic agents as actors in the economy of qualities, and the authors work through the organization of the market to demonstrate the emergence of new forms of competition as products become encoded with ‘quality’ that outdated economic epistemology cannot explain. Cultural economy can fill a similar gap left by traditional forms of economics. Thus, inserting quality into a cultural economy allows us to see how value is formed in new ways.

A cultural economy of quality food is centered on a common high quality food commodity. The goal of the cultural economy is to understand relationships that are formed as actors interact with the food in specific ways in attempt to contribute to the development of new organizations of the market (Callon et al. 2002). Cultural economy consists of an inter-dependent network where production and consumption are linked through material and symbolic actions and objects. This approach recognizes the dependence between consumers, producers, and other actors as it reframes both ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ and seeks to integrate the social processes that take place within a commodity network. Tracing the commodity network, then, emphasizes a balance
found in the quantitative and qualitative values of a commodity. Cultural economy can be disconcerting because of its chaotic nature; however, its lack of organization adds a fresh and necessary component to traditional economic approaches.

First, cultural economy emphasizes the symbolic characteristics of a commodity. Cultural economy can be considered a cultural practice where space is constituted. In a space of social interaction, economic behaviors are formed and framed. The spaces through which actors participate in the creation of symbolic meaning are part and parcel of the cultural economy at various scales, depending on who considers the product to be of value. For example, certain ethnic or religious groups may place greater value on a product than others who live in the same town. At a larger scale, an entire nation may prefer certain commodities. Within this space, signifiers such as quality also play an important role in driving the processes that comprise the network. Throughout various points of production, distribution, and consumption of a commodity, the product is labeled as ‘quality.’ Appadurai’s (1986) ‘the social life of things’ illustrates the complex ways that the value of objects are made up by its symbolic value as it becomes recognized as quality. This value is formed and shaped through the spaces and social processes within which a commodity interacts. The commodification of objects is a culturally determined practice where certain social spaces find a commodity to have symbolic value.

Second, cultural economy takes into account the material value of a commodity. ‘The social life of things’ plays an important role in cultural economy because socially determined symbolic practices are not enough to determine the value of the object. The material qualities that constitute the commodity are indeed important. From the scientists
who work with seeds and the ecological growing conditions of agricultural products to the milling and processing plants, there are various nodes in an assemblage where material quality is determined and projected with the product. With each addition of quality, the material value of the product grows. Indeed, many quality products are labeled as such because they have characteristics that make the product better than others. It is the ways that these commodities then interact with people that bring quality of the commodity to life through symbolic actions. Thus, the commodity network of a product is determined through both its symbolic and material practices. The social life of a commodity is found in the interaction between subjects and objects. Nonetheless, cultural economy examines the broader scope of the social processes surrounding a commodity.

Within this context, finally, cultural economy considers a network approach to understanding a particular situation where production and consumption are not seen as linear opposites. Jackson’s (2002) work on commercial culture challenges dualistic thinking that separates production from consumption, local from global, and culture from economy. Through a critique of the commodity chain, which he sees as linear and simplistic, Jackson argues for a network or circuit approach to understanding the economy. Commodity networks are not linear chain systems, but networks with broken links and feedback systems. Some stems of the circuit may end, while others provide feedback to earlier aspects of the system or jump ahead to later parts. Although this approach is disjointed, it represents the complexities of understanding culture and economy simultaneously. Seeing a cultural economy as a circuit and network highlights the complexities found within products, which increasingly have global ties.
Understanding the complexity of the assemblages involved in a network can transcend traditional linear dualisms by showing the interactions between forces of production and consumption at various scales. A commodity gains quality through a series of symbolic and material practices at various nodes in an assemblage and within a certain space of cultural and economic practices.

A cultural economy of quality food recognizes the complex relationships between people and commodities. What is most difficult to articulate in proposing a so-called model is the specific social or political context in which the commodity is situated. For that reason, I turn to the case of a high quality staple food in China. Short-grain japonica rice grown in China’s northeast region has become famous for its high quality value and taste within China. This rice has both material characteristics that make it a quality grain as well as an image that this rice is ‘quality.’ The Chinese government is directly involved in this phenomenon because it has taken measures over the past decade to promote high quality grain. More generally, the state is seeking to shed its image of being home to the world’s production as it caters to its growing domestic consumer society. Within this context, there are several major groups of actors that are involved in the production of the rice itself as well as the image of this rice as high quality. There is no regulatory environment through which the label of ‘quality’ must adhere. Thus, the discursive value of northeast rice as possessing quality is powerful. Quality is a combination of the interactions between people and rice at various stages of production to label this rice as such.

While the use of cultural economy in agro-food studies has flourished, its application has been ambiguous as both a method and a theory. While Dixon (1999)
provides a methodological model that expands on commodity chain analyses, this model does not include more recent theoretical contributions to agro-food studies. Including these theoretical contributions broadens the greater political and cultural context in which a commodity exists, as we will see with the politics of quality in Chinese society. Moreover, we can understand the cultural economy of agro-food systems as a theoretical breaking point from commodity chains by understanding the channels through which commodities flow as networks. Within these networks, the commodity is affected by a number of human and non-human factors which ultimately change the course of the commodity.

When a food commodity gets the label of ‘quality’ attached to it through consumer recognition, state regulatory or standardizing labels, or company marketing campaigns, a certain amount of value is placed on that commodity. Using the lens of cultural economy can explain where and how that label gets placed on the commodity. Moreover, cultural economy also provides insight into what happens to the commodity once it has obtained that label of quality. The value of commodities is shaped in a variety of different ways that rearticulate and reinforce that idea that food is a ‘quality’ product. When examining food commodities—especially those considered to be high quality—in different political and cultural contexts, a cultural economy framework appropriately provides the methodological and theoretical tools necessary to identify and locate the ways value is attached to a product.

Conclusion
In this study, I build on theories of cultural economy to understand the social, political, cultural, and economic processes through which northeast rice travels. I argue that such an approach reveals the participatory roles that all actors in this network play and especially takes into account the performative roles that consumers play. With the case of northeast rice, the way that consumers articulate their needs and preferences for rice impacts and affects the interactions that scientists, producers, and other actors along the network have with rice. Cultural economy posits consumers at a reflexive position along the network and recognizes the complex and informed decisions consumers make when faced with a variety of choices.

Each of the actors along the commodity network of northeast rice is equally influenced by broader power structures. As commodity networks recognize the spatial process that food travels, it also recognizes the ways that value is created along and through the network. In the case of northeast rice, as we will see throughout the dissertation, value is formed through the material and symbolic characteristics of this rice. Symbolically, ‘quality’ (zhiliang) products are keyword in China’s development and modernization process. Overcoming the Maoist emphasis on the production of quantities of goods, the era of reform, post-socialism, and retail capitalist economies indicates that quality goods maintain importance in Chinese society and the marketplace. These symbolic qualities will be discussed further in the following chapter. Similarly, the state has made efforts to increase the material quality of grain. I will further discuss these efforts in Chapter 4. Together, the material and symbolic characteristics of Chinese rice, make a compelling argument for the use of a cultural economy perspective of agro-food products.
Chapter 3

The Chinese Project of Quality:

*Su**zhi* and *Zhiliang*

As mentioned earlier, discussions of *suzhi* are found often in Chinese society. These discussions, while very much a part of society, originated from state discourse in the 1980s to encourage families to have one quality child. Today, that discourse is found throughout society. In this chapter, I trace the way that *suzhi* has gained common understanding among the population, even as its definitions remain unclear, as it has moved away from the state. The power of this discourse, I argue, represents the ways that the Chinese state has started to govern its population from afar. While the state is no longer actively creating and promoting the idea of quality citizenship to its population, it has found new ways to incorporate the discourse of *suzhi* into its governance tactics. One of these strategies, I argue in this chapter, is through the creation and promotion of quality products. In this sense (as described in Chapter 1), quality when referring to products is *zhiliang*—not *suzhi*.

Indeed, the meanings, uses and connotations of *suzhi* and *zhiliang* are quite different. As I describe below, while *suzhi* refers to a quality person, its connotations are much stronger and extend to ideas of class and citizenship (Anagnost 2004), *zhiliang* simply refers to whether products are quality. However, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, the ideas constituting *zhiliang* products maintain constructed and symbolic
characteristics. While they also have material qualities to allow for the construction of ideas of quality, the ways that quality products have grown in prominence and importance in Chinese society and retail economy over the past decade indicates that they are being driven by a much larger force. This larger force, I argue, comes in part from the Chinese state’s new dedication to maintaining an economy where quality goods and products are produced and consumed. Using the case of grain, I demonstrate the dramatic shift that state priorities have undergone since the formation of the PRC. While the goals of producing mass quantities of grain for food security remain important in China, we can also note the entrance of the discourse of quality (zhiliang) grains into agricultural policies. This entrance is important in understanding the ways the state is guiding the economy from afar, just as it is governing its population.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the ways that the Chinese state has governed since the formation of the PRC. Under Mao, the CCP directly controlled the lives of its citizens by organizing people and the economy in strict ways. That control began to relinquish with Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s as greater attention was given to creating the foundations of a more efficient market-based economy. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, focus on the economy then shifted again to attention on the retail and consumer-end of the economy. Within this latest trend of developing retail and consumer economies, we see a shift to higher quality goods. The next section of this chapter reviews the literature on suzhi as it makes the case that quality people are entwined in this consumer market development trend. Finally, the last section of this chapter focuses on the ways that agricultural grain production priorities and policies have also followed the trend towards quality. Of most products—both agricultural and industrial—produced in
China, grain has been the one that the Chinese state is most focused on producing mass quantities with quality as a low priority until recently. With a growing focus on the quality of grain produced, we can understand that this broad shift to quality has affected most products in China, thereby creating market standards for high quality goods. In this last section, I examine the shift from grain policies focusing on quantity (from food security to breeding technology) to a greater emphasis on quality grain production. This focus on quality grain production has enabled rice produced in the northeast to thrive, as the next chapter indicates. Further, with this shift, the market for northeast rice is guided by quality rice in a similar way that consumers are guided by striving to be a quality person.

**Chinese Governance in the PRC**

The experiences and practices of everyday life provide insight into the processes of Chinese modernity (Yue Dong and Goldstein 2006). In the non-western context, modernity is so often equated with ‘western.’ But in the case of China, we see the specifics of everyday life that show habits and practices that are both modern, but also ‘Chinese.’ Thus, we understand that “modernity is staged in the space of the everyday, in its myriad particular contexts and modernity in many ways reproduces and reshapes the ways the everyday is lived…The everyday then is both a materializing space and a conceptual category that enables a more critical study of modernity” (Goldstein 2006: 6). Later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, I examine the everyday practices of Chinese life, of which rice consumption is integral. While rice consumption is a ‘traditional Chinese’ activity and practice, the ways that it materializes today indicate
signs of the process of modernity. In what follows, I describe the ways that bodies were intertwined with national ideals of modernity from the Mao era through the present. In describing this, I argue that there state governance techniques have shifted from direct control to more indirect governance techniques.

Mao’s Era

Under Mao, the vision of modernity consisted of a socialist, egalitarian society where work units and communes provided daily necessities for their employees. Individuals embodied these ideals through their participation in work units or production teams. As agricultural and industrial production formed two tiers of Chinese production and development at the time, individual workers or farmers experienced the process of modernization on a daily basis. During this time, modernization could be achieved through a variety of paths. Under Mao, modernization was a utopian vision of the future. Each peasant or worker enrolled to participate in production practices because of what would come their way in the future. In this sense, Chinese waited for modernity to come to them in the future; their hard work and sacrifice was made with hopes of a modern society in the future. “Mao linked the training of the body with the strength of the nation in a new way—through the notion of continuous revolution, which was to be carried out by an active body on behalf of a nation that was forever in motion” (Brownell 1995: 57). Chinese bodies in the Mao era deprived themselves in anticipation of what their hard work would bring in the future—a modern lifestyle.

Mao’s economic development strategies began in the countryside where he had won the hearts of the peasantry through land reform. Following the Long March and the
victory of the Chinese Communist Party on October 1, 1949, Mao began his modernization of China through land redistribution. This consisted of taking land away from the landlords and distributing it equally among households. This land redistribution project took place throughout the 1950s until Mao decided that rural communes would most efficiently produce agriculture while also maintaining organization in the Chinese countryside. Mao’s economic development included how to simultaneously develop society and the economy. Production—agricultural as well as heavy industry—was central to this plan. After winning the hearts and minds of the Chinese peasantry in Revolution, Mao’s first step of business was land reform where land was equally redistributed to the peasantry. Following this reform, Mao focused his attention on building factories to produce heavy industry. This focus on industry came at nearly all costs, as workers were encouraged to scrape together their metal to melt in ‘backyard furnaces.’

Below I describe three distinct practices the state encouraged individuals to participate in to bring modernization to China. These indicate the control that the Chinese government held in daily life of individuals. First, political propaganda was widely used to spread the ideals of a utopian socialist society (Shapiro 2001). The tiers of political bureaucracy helped to spread modernization ideas through education and campaigns. Mao established a plan to bring education and literacy throughout the nation. With education campaigns, average citizens were able to not only advance political knowledge and participation by reading the works and ideas of Mao Zedong thought, but they could also experience and envision a bigger picture of the nation. Through political campaigns, citizens were encouraged to participate in activities that would embody the
ideal characteristics of a model citizen. The infamous Learn from Lei Feng campaign
during the Cultural Revolution exemplified a dedicated and selfless individual who was
committed to the nation. Lei Feng was a soldier who supposedly gave his life to the ideal
of the party-state, and Red Guard youth were taught to look up to the sacrifices he made
for the great good of China. During the Mao Era, the state drew upon political campaigns
such as Lei Feng to connect the individual to the nation. Red Guards and other youth
religiously read Mao’s Little Red Book so that they could become well-versed Mao’s
ideas and embody the spirit of the revolution.

Second, the nation’s modernization goals came primarily through mass industrial
and agricultural production, while images generated from propaganda assisted the
movement of individuals along this path. Mao’s strategy was to simultaneously develop
China’s industry and agriculture using human labor. The states separated rural and urban
society into divisions where households were accounted for based on their work unit.
The results for individuals following the direction of the state were material as well as
symbolic; individuals were rewarded with work points based on the amount of labor they
put into production. These work points were enough to get food and essential materials
for the family.

Third, extravagancies did not exist, and all families were supposed to live
according to similar living standards. Through work units, the state encouraged
egalitarian living standards. Work units provided food and basic consumer goods to each
household in urban areas. Despite differences in urban and rural living standards, the
idea that collective work would bring egalitarianism and modernization to Chinese
society prevailed. Bodies were not only working for themselves but also working for the modernization of the nation.

Before reforms took off in urban areas of China in the 1970s, the state provided most aspects of daily life and human welfare. The ‘iron rice bowl’ refers to a job, steady income, and benefits that all workers received during socialist times. In urban areas, the work unit was the main source of these benefits. Workers showed up to work everyday and in turn received housing, food, medical and health care, basic household items, and sometimes even extra perks. The work unit in urban areas was responsible for providing its workers not only with social welfare and apartments, but also with consumer items and entertainment such as movies, fresh fruit for holidays, and plastic slippers in the summer (Davis 2000). Excluding the luxuries that government officials enjoyed behind closed doors, most urban residents at this time had comparable living standards, regardless of whether they were professional or blue-collar workers. The resources of the employer, rather than the wealth of individuals or families, contributed to differences in living standards.

Aside from the work unit, the system of rationing was widespread. While some workers continued to eat their food in canteens from the workplace, the work unit distributed most food and other consumer goods. For example, at the end of each week and before holidays, the work unit distributed foodstuffs such as fresh vegetables and eggs to all its employees. There was a seasonal monotony of foodstuffs and consumers were subject to agricultural products that farmers had harvested with little motivation to please consumers. With the ration system, families needed to show ration coupons when purchasing staples such as grain and oil to ensure they had their fair share. In rural areas,
the systems of distribution were not as widespread as in the urban areas, nor were the quality of goods and services. The communes provided food to farmers and agricultural workers through canteens. In short, much economic participation by citizens in the Maoist era came through rationed goods provided by the state. In order to ensure that all goods were equally distributed, the state ensured that production quotas were met, thereby emphasizing the quantity of goods produced and distributed.

**Deng Era**

The first stage of China’s economic reforms is the rural reforms, generally considered to be from 1978-1984. In December 1978, Deng Xiaoping led these economic reforms (*gaige kaifang*) following the death of Mao. The goal was to increase market forms into the planned economy. During this time, the state-controlled grain economy increasingly and gradually began to allow the market mechanisms to have a say in production. Decollectivization of agricultural regions was the major impetus of these reforms because agricultural production had stagnated in the 1970s and fears of the disastrous Great Leap Forward loomed. Accompanying decollectivization was the emphasis on the household responsibility system (HRS). The HRS divided the rural communes of the Mao era into individual household plots (Oi 1989). Farmers in that household were then responsible for growing crops on that land. Once they paid their share of taxes in grain to the state, they were able to keep the output from their private land plots and sell it in the market for prices determined by the market. These policies dramatically raised household motivation to produce more than their share to the state, as rural incomes increased following these reforms (Oi 1989; Zweig 1997).
The state maintained high levels of grain production through the grain procurement policies. When the state broke up the agricultural collectives, they established these policies by instituting a series of grain quotas that all farmers had to reach. Farmers had to sell a certain amount of grain to the state based on the household plot size. In this first stage of reforms, the state maintained the system of unified purchase that it practiced since the 1950s. This unified procurement purchase policy forced quota sales to the state, rather than by using the market’s system of demands and incentives. By 1985, however, the state recognized that this system was ineffective. Not lonely did it not promote farmer incentive and forced them to sell too much grain to the state, but it also stopped serving the interests of the state (Oi 1986). It was originally adopted in the 1950s when grain shortage issues predominated. Costs and problems were overlooked because of the benefits it served to ensuring sufficient grain production and stable prices.

In 1985, the unified procurement policy was replaced by a system of contract procurement (Oi 1986; 1989). This replacement signifies a broader shift in the Chinese agricultural economy from food security production to commodity production (Oi 1986). Whereas unified procurement highlighted an obsession with food security policies (an subsistence/semi-subsistence agriculture), contract procurement indicated that a market for surplus grain and other commodities was developing. Under the contract procurement system, households set up contracts with the state to produce quotas that had been drastically reduced from earlier quotas. All surplus grain could then be sold at unregulated prices on the market.
Under Deng, China’s modernization vision shifted from the ideal of an equal society to a technocratic society where China would be an economic and technological leader in the world. During the Deng era, bodies were no longer viewed simply for their value in the production process, but for the knowledge they possessed. China’s economy, rather than being powered by human labor as envisioned by Mao, would be driven by science and technology. Visions of modernization were driven primarily through reforming the economy and opening up China to the rest of the world, the Four Modernizations, and a scientific and technological approach to education. Together these modernization techniques brought more science and technology to China, raised China’s position on the global stage, and developed bodies that were versed in science and technology.

First, while state-modernization was an inward-looking process under Mao, Deng’s vision of modernization was much more outward-focused. The ‘opening up’ of China ascribed not only to science and technology collaboration with other countries, but also referred to China’s drive to achieve modernization at a comparable level to other nations. Economic reform began in the countryside as the first step to gradually adopting a market-based economy for agriculture. Although this reform process took years for farmers to adopt, benefits to the farmers stood at the heart of this reform. In Chinese cities, international collaboration grew within academies and universities as foreign experts were welcomed to bring advice, particularly in scientific and economic fields.

Second, Deng’s largest campaign at the time was the Four Modernizations, which included the advancement of science and technology, military, agriculture, and industry. When Deng officially announced these goals in late 1978, China officially entered the
reform era and assumed that they would make China an economic powerhouse by the end of the 20th Century. While these modernizations continued to emphasize the self-reliance of the Mao era, they recognized the knowledge that could be gained from outside of China, hence opening China’s doors to technological exchange with Japan and the West.

Third, the state began to aim education towards advancing scientific thought and advancing technological knowledge. At this time, state ideals of modernization imagined bodies for their potential to hold and advance technological knowledge, rather than simply for their ability to produce through labor. The education system developed around these goals. In order to advance science and technology, the state chose certain individuals to reap the benefits of the reforms by gaining necessary scientific knowledge. The university system that had been shut down for a decade during the Cultural Revolution was re-opened. In addition to simply opening the universities, the state established a number of technical and vocational schools to teach engineering and other technological skills to students. During this time, bodies gained value as a site of information, knowledge, and exchange.

As reforms began to enter urban areas in the 1980s, consumption habits began to change. Streets became filled with markets of farmers selling their surplus foods. These changes were most visible in the 1990s as rationing officially came to an end and the selection of food offerings vastly expanded. Higher incomes and the appearance of new retail markets offered consumers a greater choice of items to purchase. Moreover, work units reduced their obligations to satisfy consumer demands, forcing families to participate in the market economy. Streets markets began to flourish in urban areas. Middlemen who had purchased produce directly from the farmers set up many of these
markets. They attracted consumers with a fresh variety of produce. However, many consumers remained mistrustful of the sellers and often brought their own scales along to the market to make sure sellers were selling them the right amount. These markets were also very unstable and subject to government rules and regulations that made them often move locations.

While the erosion of the work unit and rationing system led to increases in consumer choices about what food to purchase and where, it also led to increased economic disparities. As the work units gradually reduced their influence in the daily lives of citizens, economic differences between households widened. Whereas incomes were fairly equal in most urban households under the socialist system, new economic changes allowed workers in different sectors a greater income. Those that were more educated, especially in the sciences and engineering fields, saw a rise in incomes. Professional workers’ incomes increased while many blue collar workers were laid off or saw their iron rice bowl of guaranteed benefits begin to decline, eventually leading to mass internal migration to areas with jobs and benefits.

*Neoliberal China*

Neoliberalism is a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last two to three decades that includes privatization, free trade, deregulation, the reduction of the state’s influence in the economy (reduction of subsidies and social welfare programs), and replacing the concept of the public good with that of individual responsibility. Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese state introduced a number of policies aimed at reducing the government’s intervention into the economy as China prepared to
enter the World Trade Organization in 2001. Upon entering the WTO, China’s neoliberal policies have intensified in the 2000s (Harvey 2007). During this time, state-owned companies that had been formed in the 1980s and 1990s became fully privatized, the state reduced taxes in the countryside, and former state employees quickly learned the ropes of entrepreneurialism.

Dreams of science and technology carrying China through the twenty-first century as a new world leader are very much alive in Chinese society today. Science and technology parks, built with the promise of bringing economic investment, cover the landscape of Chinese cities. Students enter engineering universities and technical schools with the promise that the skills they learn as an engineer will bring them high ranking and high paying jobs in the future. However, individuals have transformed from the hard-working producers of the Mao era and the source of information gathering of the Deng era to consumers in today’s global economy. Appearing alongside the vision of science as the key to China’s success in the world comes another dream as China has ascended into the global capitalist economy. In addition to being producers and holders of knowledge, citizens are also consumers in a neoliberal economy. They are subjects of the state who are encouraged to govern themselves in the economy so they can drive the state’s new goals to fit in with the global capitalist economy. Three related culture and governance strategies that the Chinese state has developed define the ways Chinese society is now structured in a neoliberal pursuit of modernization: the consumer society, desire as a driving engine in society, and the exemplary society.

First, China has developed a consumer society. This part of society, which I use interchangeably with urban middle class or professionals, refers to the population of
mostly urban people who have expendable income to spend on such things as housing, cars, high end electronic goods as well as restaurants and food. When consumerism first began to take off in the 1990s, there was speculation that such freedom in the market place would lead to great political freedom (Davis 2000). However, over the past decade, a different story has unfolded as middle class consumers have come to be a stabilizing force for the state. In exchange for access to high-end consumer goods such as electronics and cars, these consumers accept the shortcomings of the Chinese political system (Tomba 2009). In fact, as the state has pulled out of the economy over the past two decades, stability of the middle class offers a sense of self-governing that the state does not have to worry about; if they have the money and means to take care of themselves as well as the drive to be an upstanding citizen, they do not pose a threat or concern for the Chinese state. The state has played a significant role in constructing this consumer middle class of urban professionals through the discourse of suzhi as well as by providing them with the means to participate as consumers in the market economy\(^8\). As a result, these middle class consumers are disciplined to state-sanctioned behaviors such as consuming products. Their participation in the consumer economy will likely raise China’s image as a modern nation of consumers, rather than simply of producers.

Although this consumer society seemingly is limited to those in urban areas with expendable income, the values and aspirations are found throughout the country. Upward mobility in society and migration to urban areas represents a way for those in rural areas to access the urban consumer dream in China. In short, consumerism embraces a vision

\(^8\) According to Jing Wang, we should be careful not to categorize all of China as middle class. The state has categorized the middle class based on income level and “The number of the ‘Chinese middle class’ is greatly exaggerated, and ‘new China’ remains a highly stratified society, with a total of 26.1 million households living in poverty, where annual per capita income was less than $77 in 2004 (Wang 2008: 3).
of social mobility that flourishes among rural migrants well as urban consumers (Anagnost 2004; Pun 2003). As the term ‘urban’ represents a potential to include imagination and practice, the vision of an urban lifestyle includes one of consumption that both rural and urban residents strive to achieve (Chen, et al. 2001).

Second, despite their position in Chinese society, consumers can still participate in the economy through dreams of success depicted by consumption. China’s new dream or vision of modernization, characterized as ‘desire’ by Lisa Rofel (2007), has entered the national public culture. Neoliberalism in China is a “national project about global restructuring. The project is to remake national public culture” (20). ‘Desire’ plays a key role in Chinese subject formation within a neoliberal context as the nation positions itself in a post-socialist world. Thus, as China enters the global capitalist economy, bodies become desiring consumers. Within this context, the state plays no small role in diffusing its power into the formation of desiring subjects. The production of ‘desire’ in China lies at the core of global processes. Rofel argues that the multiplicities of desire are constructed through a complex range of transnational relations of power. Historical and cultural processes and events in China disrupt totalizing assumptions about the heterogeneity of global practices found within neoliberalism. In socialist China, the state’s power to form subjects came through raising consciousness, whereas in post-socialist China, subjects are formed through desire. Their desire to consume drives the Chinese economy and creates an image of China as a modern, developed society. For Rofel, ‘desire’ in China is a key cultural practice through which the state and citizens reconfigure their relationship to a post-socialist world. The desire to consume is a “historically, socially, and culturally produced field of practices” (Rofel 2007: 14).
Third, aside from desire, the drive to achieve high levels of human quality is encompassed under China’s most recent modernization project. Bakken (2000) examines social control in the midst of Chinese reform and modernization. Bakken’s discussion of the exemplary society is made possible, in part, by the Chinese state’s project to improve human quality (suzhi renkou). This ‘quality’ is based on exemplary norms and the exemplary behavior force for realizing a modern society of perfect order. Bodies are guided through the nation’s modernization process by improving their individual quality. Together, individual subjects and the nation make up the future dreams of modernizing China. Bakken constructs the idea of a modern China through roots and memories of the past, which are created in the present to represent the dreams of a future utopia of harmonious modernity. The Chinese state as both trying to tame and control the path of modernity (putting the brakes on it), but also letting it run. Chinese modernization is contradictory; modernity is both a revolt against normalizing social tendencies and also concerned with control. Bakken sees tradition and modernity as “interlinked in a system of social control where ‘tradition’ can also serve as transforming purposes and ‘modernity’ can mean stability and order” (5). He attempts to explain the consequences of these patterns of control through the technocratic elite that have ruled post-1989 China. Modern technical means and objective scientific thought have controlled society through the project of developing ‘human quality.’

While street markets may have dominated the urban food purchasing landscapes in the 1980s and 1990s, those spaces have been taken over by the introduction of large-scale supermarkets today. Over the past decade, urban areas of China have experienced a dramatic growth in large, retail supermarkets. Many foreign-owned supermarkets, such
as Wal-Mart (US) and Carrefour (France) dominate the markets in major urban cities. A number of domestic Chinese supermarkets have opened in second-tier urban areas. Not only do these supermarkets offer a wide array of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, grain, and oils, but they also provide consumers with a wide choice of everyday necessities and household items. Accompanying the urban growth of supermarkets has been increased regulation of street markets. Many consumers continue to prefer purchasing fresh produce and meat at street markets because of freshness. Whole blocks of some streets have been turned into designated markets where vendors can rent space to sell their food. In other locations, vendors are allowed to set up on designated blocks of city streets in the mornings. By about 8 am, they must have cleared their tables and produce from the area to make room for traffic. Many of the street markets have to follow a list of standard sanitation practices in an attempt to shed images of street markets selling bad produce.

With the advent of new supermarkets and stricter standards for street markets has come greater choice for consumers. While many prefer the freshness of street markets, other consumers prefer the cleanliness and convenience of supermarkets. However, to get the best of both worlds and be able to select food from both street markets and supermarkets requires extra time and money that not all urban citizens have access to. In Chapter 6, I discuss the empirics of the research that I gathered with regard to shopping locations and environments. Many consumers prefer to shop in foreign-name supermarkets because they believe these places offer clean, quality products at a fair price. They appreciate not having to haggle or bargain for the prices and most are convinced that the plastic covering around most of the produce ensures that products are clean.
These practices indicate there has been a clear shift in economic practices that has resulted in offering quality products to citizens over the past five decades in China. With the introduction of a neoliberal consumer-based market comes new forms of state governance. As neoliberal ideas have shaped economic practices around the world, government welfare policies and practices are diminishing in favor of the emergence of privatized goods and services. With the decline of the welfare state, government goods and services are giving way to new forms of state governance practices. The state can no longer govern by traditional forms of paying taxes and receiving welfare items, but has to rely on market mechanisms. In the Mao era, the state used Marxism-Leninism to know the subject and to scientifically predict the outcomes in order to directly and coercively intervene in society. Today, China’s governance strategies rely on a mixture of socialist state technologies (such as the mass line) with neoliberal strategies that get at the desires of citizens as consumers, property-owners, and job-seekers (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009).

Applying the term governmentality to contemporary Chinese society and politics allows us to see new totalizing strategies of control in China with the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of the welfare state. With the rise of neoliberalism in China has come the emergence of new forms of state governance through consumer desires. Consumers have choices presented to them that were once unavailable to Chinese citizens; they also have the ability to own property and make choices in their educational and professional careers (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009). The Chinese state, recognizing they can no longer predict and intervene as they once did, has come to govern in different ways by controlling the market through which consumers execute their freedom and power and by guiding consumers to make informed decisions regarding the quality and
brands of the products they buy. The ways consumers carry out and perform these duties are discussed in depth in Chapter 6, but the ways the discourse of suzhi is used as a goal for consumers and citizens to achieve is laid out below.

**Suzhi as a Tool of the State**

Literature on contemporary Chinese society points to the ways the discourse of suzhi has infiltrated Chinese culture and is used as a form of governance by the Chinese state. Citizens see quality as a goal to strive to reach to distinguish themselves within society as suzhi has become a new form of class differentiation in Chinese society (Anagnost 2004). While the pervasiveness of quality in Chinese society has been well-documented (Kipnis 2006; Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004), I examine the ways that the ideals of quality have shifted from society where human actors are the main carriers of quality to the economy where products can also carry the label of quality. Before I discuss how the concept of quality has seeped into everyday life in China, I discuss the ways that bodies are connected to China’s current vision of modernity. Kipnis (2006) documents the emergence of suzhi as a state discourse that has increasingly become adopted embraced by citizens and members of society.

**Suzhi and Biopolitics**

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that power is found and executed alongside life. Both biological mechanisms as well as regulatory controls have the ability to monitor and manage life. These controls can join together to form great technologies of power, which then form new sets of power struggles where life itself
becomes a right (1978). Whereas Foucault mainly discusses biopower as “rationalized attempts to intervene upon the vital components of human existence,” the concept of biopolitics then reads as “the specific strategies and contestations over problemizations of collective human vitality, morbidity, and mortality; over the forms of knowledge, regimes of authority and practices of intervention that are desirable, legitimate and efficacious” (Rabinow and Rose 2006: 196-197). Biopolitics can develop in a variety of different forms, such as race, reproduction, and biomedical developments. In each of these cases, the state or practitioners execute power over the controls of human life. Emerging from China’s own family planning policy in the early 1980s, the discourse of suzhi is linked to the state’s biopolitical control of its population.

In the post-Mao 1980s, state officials began to promote the discourse of suzhi within the language of the state’s one-child policy. The state implemented this policy in the early 1980s to encourage families to have one child to limit the growth of China’s large population. This proved to be a difficult obstacle because the state previously encouraged large families, as had been tradition in China for years. In order to reverse this culture, the discourse of suzhi encouraged parents to cultivate the quality rather than quantity of their children. When the discourse first began to appear, the primary means of doing so was through genetic counseling and eugenics (Kipnis 2006). As citizens gained greater freedom to produce and consume according to individual wants and needs, this state-directed discursive strategy encouraged characteristics which embodied the ideal of a quality citizen. Because the discourse was led and directed by the state, it demonstrated the power of the state to demand respect from the people.
With new forms of biomedical research becoming more popular and accepted, Nicholas Rose discusses the ways that human life has been reduced to the molecular level. At this level, human life can be anatomized and engineered. “It seems, there is nothing mystical or incomprehensible about our vitality—anything and everything appears, in principle, to be intelligible, and hence open to calculated interventions in the service of our desires to be about the kinds of people we want ourselves and our children to be” (Rose 2007: 4). Although Rose discusses biopolitics mainly in the context of biomedical engineering research and development, the idea of food in China is not that far away. Food and medicine are deeply entwined in ideas of traditional Chinese medicine (Farquhar 2002). Many Chinese know the medicinal qualities that certain foods are ascribed with and are willing to tell a friend or relative to eat such a food if they are experiencing a certain ailment. These ‘traditional’ conceptions of food are increasingly affected by state and popular ideas of nutrition that have increasingly flooded the market.

In the 1990s, the discourse of suzhi spread from official publications into more popular forms. This spread into Chinese society is evident as members of society began to think of suzhi not strictly as a biological tool, but also one that can be nurtured and cultivated in the child. The contemporary pervasiveness of the term comes, in part, from its ability to speak to concerns of both Party leaders as well as those of society at large (Kipnis 2006). As inequality becomes more evident in China’s social strata, urban residents seek to find innovative ways to increase their suzhi so they can distinguish and separate themselves from the masses (Yan 2003).

In the 2000s, suzhi is generally associated with investment in human and cultural capital through consumption. For many Chinese citizens, the drive to attain a high suzhi
is evident in the ways they invest in themselves or their children through education and cosmopolitan consumption. Many aspects of the *suzhi* discourse have moved away from the nature of human reproduction toward the household environment in which a child is nurtured. In China’s urban middle class, the ways in which families acquire households is evident of new social strata. But more importantly, as Luigi Tomba argues, the emergence of a powerful middle class is indeed a result of coordinated policymaking and social engineering by the state (2009). Although it can be argued that *suzhi* appears to be just another form of class in Chinese society, the ways that this discourse has emerged have been a deliberate effort by the state to construct new behaviors and characteristics in its subjects. These new behaviors started simply as a way to guide the population as the state introduced the one-child policy in the early 1980s, but has shifted toward creating a consuming middle class in the 2000s.

One of the many changes China has experienced in the past three decades of reform is found in the connection between bodies and the state. While bodies used to be the means of production while Mao emphasized more births, they are now, in part, the means of raising China’s quality. By following the *suzhi* discourse, families have one child that they raise and cultivate to be a quality person. This cultivation can come in a variety of forms, including quality education, possessing the behaviors of a ‘proper’ citizen, and being a middle class consumer. By following the directions of the *suzhi* discourse, the urban middle class are transforming into neoliberal subjects of the state to uphold ideas of proper citizenry and consumption.
Suzhi and the Body

Clearly, the ability to raise one’s suzhi comes from a combination of nature and nurture. While eugenics reaches into biological tools to cultivate a child’s suzhi, education falls into the realm of nurturing the child. One topic that has been absent from discussions of suzhi has been health and nutrition. In China, diet is mixed in with traditional ideas of medicine. Food choices have been a part of family and household traditions for centuries, and certain foods are often associated with alleviating certain ailments. Throughout the Mao era and the early reform era, the state had little involvement in nutritional standards as it main goals were to feed its population. Food was rationed, so most households had quotas on the amounts of food they could access. The state granted extra rations to special cases, such as athletes or those undertaking long hours of hard manual labor (Brownell 1995), but for the most part, grain was rationed per mouth with little regard to the size of the individual.

Figure 1. Chinese Food Pagoda.
However, by the 1990s after the reforms had set in, the Chinese Ministry of Health recognized a significant rise in the number of disease-related non-communicable deaths (Zhai et al. 2002). This reality led to a number of nutrition-related public health policies and campaigns. Most significant was the Pagoda, the Chinese Nutrition Society’s response to the USDA’s food pyramid. Accompanying this pagoda were eight principal standards of nutrition:

1. Eat a variety of foods with cereals as the staple.
2. Consume plenty of vegetables, fruits, and tubers.
3. Consume milk, beans, or dairy and bean products daily.
4. Consume appropriate amounts of fish, poultry, eggs, and lean meat. Reduce fatty meat and animal fat in the diet.
5. Balance food intake with physical activity to maintain a healthy body weight.
6. Choose a light diet that is also low in salt.
7. Drink alcoholic beverages in limited amounts, if at all.
8. Avoid unsanitary and spoiled foods.

(Zhai et al. 2002)

After it was released, this food pyramid and guidelines set the standards for public and educational nutrition programs as well as health and agricultural planning in China (Ge and McNutt 2000). The broad scope of the plan also sought to jump-start Chinese nutritional policies to integrate nutrition into China’s long-term development goals.

While the guidelines are meant to educate Chinese and create broader programs on good nutrition practices, they distinctly mimic nutritional guidelines of the West. The Pagoda, while maintaining a Chinese appearance, offers similar advice to the USDA’s food pyramid. Although sugar was left out of the pagoda because there is not much sugar in the Chinese diet, other categories are quite similar. Also, throughout the 2000s, Chinese public health officials have engaged in campaigns to promote dairy and beef consumption in China. Dairy and beef have not been at the heart of the Chinese diet for a long time, but consumption has rapidly increased over the past decade. People that I talk
to have come to associate ‘big, strong Westerners’ with the daily consumption of dairy and beef.\(^9\) They understand that our diet consists of beef, milk, and cheese, which they attribute to the larger sizes (both height and weight) of Westerners than Chinese. While there were a number of reasons for China to introduce and implement its own national nutritional guidelines, one of these reasons might be so they can attain a diet similar to Westerners and, thus, produce bodies that are healthier and stronger than the typical Chinese body.

**Suzhi and Neoliberalism**

As discussed earlier, I consider the past decade in China to be one characterized by neoliberal practices. Unlike the 1950-1990s, the policies that have emerged in this era are not attributed to just one leader (Mao and then Deng), but are attached to an idea of global capitalism. In China’s transition from socialism to capitalism, we find an extreme case of the state pulling away from the goods and services it once provided citizens. Although citizens have greater freedom in the new market economy, they remain subjects of the state and often follow the discursive practices outlined by the state, as in the case of *suzhi*. Part of the discourse emphasizes the ways that people can govern themselves, thereby allowing the state to step away. Ann Anagnost argues that *suzhi* is about self-discipline and attaining social distinction, “Suzhi’s sense has been extended from a discourse of backwardness and development (the quality of the masses) to encompass the minute social distinctions defining a ‘person of quality’ in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle class desire for social mobility” (2004: 190). The state’s

\(^9\) Ironically, the nutritional advice book *The China Study* was published in 2005, highlighting the low animal protein Chinese diet as a model for lowering risks of non-communicable disease (Campbell and Campbell 2005).
promotion of consumption as a means to achieve modernity then justifies China’s adoption of a market economy. Based on their location within cosmopolitan cities and the connotations of ‘urban’ within China’s social hierarchy, urban residents are generally associated with a higher suzhi. However, the ideal of a quality citizen is not simply limited to urban residents. As the term ‘urban’ represents a potential to include imagination and practice, the vision of an urban lifestyle includes one of consumption that both rural and urban residents strive to achieve (Chen, et al. 2001). Urban, then, is a ‘workable substance’ and not a static identity. Peasants who leave the countryside to work in the city are releasing themselves from production so they can consume. The peasants who cannot leave the countryside continue to envision the ideals of consumption in rural areas, even as they continue to work in the field of production (Yan 2003).

Accompanying this vision of consumption is investing in the value of the self through participation in the market economy.

The state’s discourse of suzhi reflects its desire to shed its image as the world’s production factory and instead create innovative subjects (Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004). Similarly, at the scale of the body, urban consumers seek to become quality citizens, the consumption of certain ‘high quality’ products reflects a decision to separate themselves from the ‘masses’ (Bourdieu 1984). Studies on Chinese society reflect a gradual shift in the meanings of ‘modernization.’ Whereas under Mao production was the key to achieving modernization, today the push to consume can be considered a state-driven initiative aimed at China reaching global modernity (Pun 2003). During the 1990s, a ‘consumer revolution’ hit China as consumer goods became more accessible to urban residents (Davis 2000). In the post-1989 political environment, Western scholars saw
this consumer revolution as having a democratizing force on social space. However, rather than making the leap to political change from consumer choice, the growth of this choice provides insight into the ways in which the logic of capitalist consumption enters Chinese society. As urban consumption has overtaken the focus on rural production, the machine of production has been condensed and ‘sub-sumed’ within China’s new economy (Pun 2003).

Although the Chinese state has definitely retrieved from its overbearing presence in Chinese society, it might be quite a large leap to say that the discourse of suzhi has replaced the state’s presence in social affairs. As Andrew Kipnis (2007) argues, the discourse of suzhi is rooted in traditional Chinese methods of cultivation and cannot be attributed to the introduction of a neoliberal economy. While quality consumption is a new aspect of daily life in Chinese society, the discourse of suzhi does not simply explain that people participate in market activities as a way to alleviate pressure from the state to provide. Indeed, as Kipnis argues, neoliberalism is a complex and contradictory process and the Chinese state is not simply allowing the discourse of suzhi to govern. Instead, this discourse is a factor in Chinese society that is integral to the modernization process and helps to explain the emergence of new identities associated with consumption that are linked directly to the state’s modernization goals.

In short, Chinese citizens are working to be ‘exemplary’ citizens (Bakken 2000). Anthropologists and sociologists studying China tend to highlight the spaces of consumption that China’s post-socialist state has created for social class and distinction (Rofel 1999; Farquhar 2002; Hanser 2007; Wang 2008). In these studies, a distinction between ‘then’ and ‘now’ or ‘past’ and ‘present’ exists with the acknowledgement that
there is no set line of distinction. In fact, as Farquhar points out, many aspects of Maoism are still alive in China:

The moralistic rhetoric of the Communist Party, which urges collective service, public civility, and deferral of selfish aims, can still be found in all manner of official documents...In a sense, though, the sobriety of this rhetoric only makes it easier to note, in many mundane acts, the contrast between then and now, between Maoist aestheticism and the modern middle class enjoyment of capitalist luxuries. The best revenge, Americans like to say, is living well. Chinese consumers in the reform era (1976 to the present) appear to agree (2002: 3).

Farquhar sees China’s post-socialist development in the individual actions that consumers make by indulging in a lifestyle where they live well. I further explore these consumption behaviors and spaces throughout the dissertation. What is absent from these cultural analyses is the role that post-socialism has on the economy. Ching Kwan Lee (2002) argues that in post-socialist China, the planned economy no longer plays a central role in determining production or consumption. My goal is to highlight the spaces, including opportunities for participation in the market economy as well as challenges of surviving in the planned economy, that China’s economic transition has brought. When examining the economic structures of northeast rice, I find fragmented segments from different eras of economic reforms. These spaces have been created in the midst of a transition that fulfill neither the ideal of a socialist, state-planned economy nor a free market capitalist economy.

While Chinese prefer to vaguely describe their economy as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ I examine the spaces where economic transactions surrounding northeast rice occur to find where individuals and rice find a space to exist and perhaps even thrive, in the midst of state withdrawal and capitalist intervention. While China is moving towards a capitalist retail market by advocating the use of advertising, marketing,
and large supermarkets for food products, I maintain that this transition is being propelled by the state and society through a desire for a capitalist society (Rofel 2007). However, as state and society push this desire forward, the standards and controls that have developed over time in capitalist societies are not fully developed.

China’s position as a post-socialist country has always been unique in that it is a large Asian economy. In this case, the case of other Asian rice economies can add another dimension of similarities China’s economy shares with those that share a similar agricultural base. In *The Rice Economies* Francesca Bray (1986) challenges the Eurocentric model of historical change lens through which historians and/or economists tend to see Asian agrarian economies. Such categorization is problematic in that it tends to evade the specificities from which Asian agricultural economies deviate from the European norm and also deny that significant change has occurred. Categorizing China as ‘post-socialist’ highlights the differences of socialism and capitalism without examining the intricacies that occur in between. These intricacies appear not only within the way the Chinese state governs society using the discourse of *suzhi*, but also in the ways it uses *zhiliang* to guide and direct the market and economy for high quality rice. In what follows, I describe the ways the Chinese state has increasingly used the discourse of *zhiliang* in its grain production policies over the past decade.

**State Grain Agricultural Policies: From Mass Quantities to High Quality**

For many years, discussions of Chinese agriculture have centered on food security. The issue has been a concern of both the Chinese state and academics worldwide. Western academics have analyzed Chinese agriculture by addressing China’s
ability to grow enough food to feed its large population over its long history (Perkins 1969; King 1911). Since before the formation of the PRC, the Chinese state has focused on ensuring that the nation can produce enough food for China to remain self-sufficient. This focus intensified under Mao and Deng where agriculture was modernized respectively by human labor and then the introduction of technological advancements. The Chinese state’s obsession with food security was re-ignited in 1995 when Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute made the assertion that not only would China soon not feed itself, but China’s need for food would impact the entire world. Since Brown’s publication in 1995, Chinese agricultural scientists, economists, and policy-makers have taken on the challenge that China can and will be self-sufficient in agricultural production. It was not until recently that the quality of food China is producing has become a topic of discussion both domestically and around the world.

The Chinese government has put a significant amount of time, effort, and investment into developing and improving rice breeding technology. The goal of this chapter is to explore how rice breeding has evolved from addressing the problem of food security to more complex issues in China’s globalized capitalist economy. In the past, the state used market reform and rice breeding technology to address the domestic issue of food security. Given that economic projections assert China’s food security is no longer an urgent short-term problem, the state has the time to address less pressing security problems, such as the quality of grain produced. With China becoming a major global actor, it has to balance domestic challenges of keeping its population content as well as project an image to the world that China is a modern and civilized country. These challenges, brought on by China embracing a global capitalist market, are not as simple
as adjusting the market and introducing new technology, as was the case under the planned economy. China’s entrance into the global capitalist economy has complicated both the goals and the regulation of rice breeding technology. With a free market economy, the state’s goal in grain production is no longer clearly to feed the masses, but to feed them well with high quality, commodity rice that will drive the market and show the rest of the world that China has the capability to produce quality, safe food.

Today, as the ideal Chinese citizen is also a ‘global’ citizen (Rofel 2007), the state faces a diversity of challenges in satisfying global and domestic concerns. For the past several decades, Chinese researchers have been leaders in developing rice breeding techniques. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the Chinese state holds a significant amount of power in determining the direction of rice breeding technology to develop rice to satisfy the needs of its citizens. In the past, the primary goal of the state’s agricultural apparatus was to simply produce enough food to feed the people. The state is now forced to expand its goals to contend with these factors in a global capitalist economy. Although the state’s attitude about the use of science and technology has shifted, the idea of using science to modernize, the idea that agricultural production must first meet food security goals, and the need to produce mass quantities of grain have remained the same. Recently, as we see at the end of the chapter, scientists have moved beyond quantity to recognize that quality is a high priority.

Self-Sufficiency for Food Security

Depending on the context and situation, the concept of food security (or food insecurity) has different meanings or connotations. In many cases of development, food
security tends to be measured by the household and the term refers to the ability of the household to provide sufficient nutrition to the family. However, in Communist China, where the state established itself as the provider for the population (the masses), issues of food security are discussed at the national scale (Lohmar 2002). Whether China can produce enough food to feed its entire population is the largest issue of Chinese food security. Moreover, in the Chinese context, food security implies self-sufficiency and the ability to maintain an insular grain economy. Chinese leaders have aggressively pursued policies and practices aimed at ensuring China’s self-sufficiency in food—specifically grain—production. More specifically, in the 1960s, Communist leaders spread propaganda of self-reliance (zili gengsheng) for regions and villages so every village could produce enough food for itself. Then China as a country would not have a food shortage problem.

Mao’s self-sufficiency goals were evident in both food and agriculture as well as industry when Chinese leaders were determined to resist entering the global capitalist economy. What made this Marxist concept so appealing to Chinese leaders was that it followed what China had been doing for hundreds of years, and Chinese leaders have maintained legitimacy of rule based on their ability to maintain grain reserves. As discussed below, the policy of providing grain reserves has been in China for hundreds of years and these reserves formed the foundation for Chinese food security. Combining ideas that grain is a political tool to be produced by the masses but used by the state with Communist propaganda, the CCP leadership was able to motivate the rural masses to feed themselves.
In order to accomplish this grain self-sufficiency goal in the Chinese countryside, the Communist leaders created large, mass campaigns in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kicking off the Great Leap Forward were Mao’s campaigns to “Take Grain as the Key Link” (Yiliang Weigang) and to “Take Steel as the Key Link” (Yigeng Weigeng). Grain and steel production formed the basis of agricultural and industrial goals; while grain would pull agricultural production, steel would pull industry. However, the emphasis on village steel production, plus a combination of local officials reporting higher production levels than they were actually producing and bad weather, led to famine in the early 1960s. Following the disaster of the GLF, the CCP leadership began to loosen its tight control in the countryside. Grain became the focus—if not obsession—of agricultural policies (Shapiro 2001). Although farmers were now permitted to grow their own crops (mostly vegetables) on the side in individual plots, collectively they were required to produce grain. The grain as the key link campaign continued after the GLF. The campaign emphasized grain production; grain was seen as the source of development for China’s countryside and producing grain was a moral duty of the farmers. Areas and regions that had been barren wastelands (particularly the northwest) were turned over to grain cultivation.

With the GLF disaster not too far behind him, Mao feared the loss of peasant rigor and realized he needed to get at the hearts and minds of the farmers. His solution was to create a major agricultural campaign during the 1960s: “Learn from Dazhai.” Dazhai is a village in Shanxi province in the mountains of northern China where, prior to efforts made by the Communists, agricultural production was difficult in the region’s

---

10 However, as Peter Ho points out, aside from grain production, this campaign also emphasized the diversification of crops and not just grain (2003).
mountainous terrain. It was only after village leaders collaborated with the People’s Liberation Armey (PLA) to terrace the hills and create irrigation systems that sufficient agriculture could be produced to feed the village. These steps the village took then became a model for other villages to follow in order to attain local self-sufficiency. Farmers throughout China were expected to take the same steps as Dazhai to "move the mountains to make farm fields," to "change the sky and alter the land," and to "work bitterly, diligently, and with extra energy, and build our village into a Dazhai-like one in three years" (Shapiro 2001). Propaganda posters like the one below were distributed throughout the country, and villagers and farmers from Dazhai became national heroes. By June of 1964, Dazhai was a national model for agriculture. The county was initially promoted for its example of hard work, independence, and close relations between leaders and peasants. However, as Dazhai became famous and as Mao recognized parts of China were losing the revolutionary fervor that had carried the party in the past, Dazhai became a “universal political paradigm for the revolutionary rigor and fervor” that had been lost (Shapiro 2001: 96).

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, Chinese youth were exposed to propaganda and stories of Dazhai and were expected to work hard like the farmers of Dazhai. As Shapiro points out, the slogans ‘Take Grain as the Key Link’ and ‘In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai,’ were key themes in the nationwide effort to stockpile grain. The ‘Take Grain as the Key Link’ policy was thus transformed from a post-famine emphasis on staple crops into a Dazhai-related overemphasis on grain. The policy evolved into a uniformly applied, urgent political campaign to grow grain regardless of natural conditions (2001: 106).
Shapiro emphasizes the environmental consequences from the universal application of models such as Dazhai to specific local environmental conditions.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Recent Food Security Projections}

Western researchers have tried to understand the techniques and practices that have allowed Chinese agriculture to sustain the land and feed its people over a long history (King 1911; Perkins 1969). This quest to understand Chinese agriculture continued into the Mao era with the politics of rural collective agriculture. Mao’s massive collectivization experiment in the 1950s, combined with the state’s determination to be self-sufficient in food production in the 1960s, generated attention from Westerners trying to understand the politics of agricultural production (Buck et al. 1966). Throughout the 1980s, the Chinese economy grew as rural and then urban reforms took off, and while production levels remained important, there was little focus directly on food security; the fear of food security lingered in the background. However, it re-emerged in the 1990s. This time, the fear of food security came from abroad and was mixed in with fears of a global food shortage and global environmental crisis. In 1995, Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute in Washington DC, published a book entitled \textit{Who Will Feed China?} which emphasized the stress of a growing population and increasing environmental issues on China’s food production.

Brown’s proclamation was not made out of feelings of concern or being impressed at innovativeness of the Chinese peasants, but it was made with fear for the global market for grain and the global environment. Whereas both King and Perkins

\textsuperscript{11} However, it is important to recognize these campaigns had distinct purposes, and while grain was certainly an important aspect of agricultural production at this time, it was not the only focus (Ho 2003).
sought to understand how China could accomplish its tasks, Brown brought a negative fear-generating approach to his study. From this neo-Malthusian view, Brown argued that China’s increasing population and growing economic development are placing increased demands on grain. At the same time, land resources are decreasing due to increased urbanization and industrialization. This drop in cropland area comes at the same time as awareness grows of environmental issues stemming from increased development such as decreased water shortages, soil erosion, and land pollution. This combination of environmental degradation and economic development, Brown argued, will lead to China purchasing more grain on the world market, thus raising grain prices worldwide. This price increase will then affect the poor in developing countries the most because they have the least to begin with and will lead them into famine.

Brown’s book created a heated debate that delved into the depths of Chinese nationalism (Boland 2000). However, China’s response to Brown’s infamous question was that China would feed China. Within China Brown’s claims generated a plethora of rigorous studies addressing China’s food security issue. These projections, most coming from within China and using different methods, vary greatly (Huang et al. 1997). In the short-term, most scientists and agricultural economists project that China can continue to produce enough grain and food to feed its population for the first half of the twenty-first century. According to Huang et al. (1997), while many Chinese economists, following up on Brown’s predictions, argue that China’s capacity to produce grain will outpace grain demand in the next few decades, other studies report that China could start importing grain within the next decade. Different models using various factors as well as
the uncertainty of the direction of China’s developing economy likely cause the disparities of these studies.

Despite the variety and differences found in these projections, most—if not all—Chinese scientists and researchers I spoke with agreed that, in the short-term future, China did not face a major food security crisis. They cited the state policies that uphold state ideals to maintain high levels of domestic grain production as well as economists’ predictions that technology would improve enough to feed China’s growing population in the future. The combination of technological optimism and positive projection models gave way to a variety of research directions for grain in the early 2000s that extend beyond the issue of food security. As one rice breeder told me, “the issue of the quantity of rice has been solved for the time being; now our biggest challenge is to raise the quality of the rice because China’s consumers want to eat better rice than they have in the past.” Following the large number of studies claiming China had no or little short-term food security crisis, research scientists began to focus on developing seeds, technologies, and studies of grain that were able to look beyond quantity. As we see below, the quality of seeds has gained great attention in the 2000s. In China’s new capitalist economy where consumers have the choice to purchase higher quality grains, the production of rice continues to act as a political tool. In this case, however, it is not simply to feed the consumers until they are full (chedebao) but to feed them well (chidehao).

Another event in the early 2000s that occurred in China and attracted more attention to the issue of food security was China’s 2001 entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Negotiations between China and the WTO had persisted throughout the 1990s, and ended with commitments on China’s part to open its
agricultural economy, including transparent and significant tariff-rate quotas for staple grains and other important commodities, limits on levels of trade-distorting domestic support China can extend to farm commodities, and measures that will undermine the monopoly power of state trading companies and will likely promote domestic market development (Lohmar 2002). Although impacts of WTO accession on China’s agricultural sector have been difficult to predict and assess, the accession is generally thought to have a positive impact on food security. In the non-agricultural sector, WTO accession is expected to raise rural incomes even if prices for agricultural products fall. Combined with increased opportunities for migration, WTO entrance is likely to raise rural household incomes (Lohmar 2002).

One of the reasons confidence in China’s short-term food security situation is so strong is that the trust in government policies related to food security. Research priorities and policies no longer focus primarily on the production of mass quantities of grain, but are also starting to focus on producing high quality grain. This does not mean, however, that the state has abandoned all efforts to maintain mass quantities of grain. The state has three main policies (discussed below) that have derived from the collective era and before seek to maintain high levels of grain production. Although the state has pulled out of other areas of agricultural production, it maintains a strong hold over policies related to grain production.

First, as carried over from Chinese empires of the past, the state maintains a stock of grain reserves. The size and number of these reserves is considered a state secret. These stocks are expensive to maintain and act as a security device to ease the minds of the population. In addition to state stocks, many mills and private companies have their
own commercial reserves, as do Grain Bureaus, and many rural households have their own stocks as well. While the state grain bureaus maintain grain stocks, it is likely used to assure that urban consumers and military can access the grain more than low-income farming households (Lohmar 2002).

Second, policies aimed at grain marketing exist to encourage grain production. Perhaps more than grain reserves or self-sufficiency policies, these marketing policies have been most affected by the reforms. Chinese leaders see the undisrupted supply of grain to urban areas and low grain price volatility as important political goals in their quest to maintain food security. As a result, the state maintains strict controls over the marketing and distribution of staple grains. While farmers have sold nearly all of their fruit and vegetables on the free markets since the 1978 reforms began, state control of grain marketing prevails. At its most liberalized point in the early 1990s, one-third of grain was handled by non-state traders (Lohmar 2002). Although the state took greater control of the grain market in the late 1990s, in the 2000s the grain market has increased liberalized, although it does not possess the same freedom its had in the early 1990s.

Third, many policies are aimed at generating self-sufficiency in grain production. In 1995, China established the Governors Grain Bag Policy. This policy encouraged provincial governors to balance local supply and demand in order to achieve self-sufficiency at the provincial scale. The central state expected provincial leaders to take control of the province’s own grain supply to keep up with demand. Such a policy revived waning ideas of self-reliance (zili gengsheng) at local and provincial levels while seeking to control food security at the national scale. Additionally, by controlling grain imports and exports, the Chinese state manages to control food security at the national
scale. However, by emphasizing the production of grain, many self-sufficiency policies may discourage rural households from increasing their incomes through the production of commodities (Lohmar 2002).

Technological Change

Throughout most of China’s long history, farmers paid their taxes directly to the state in the form of rice and other grains. This began to change in the mid-1800s as industrialization and the development of urban areas along China’s east coast began. At this time, farmers in the western regions of the Yangtze River valley (such as Sichuan and Hunan) began to produce surplus grain to sell to the eastern cities. While China remained a large producer of grains at that time, a number of rice merchants and traders in Southeast Asia sold rice to Chinese cities, ensuring that China had enough grain to meet its demands. Despite the political upheavals of the early twentieth century, Chinese farmers continued to produce just about enough grain to feed the country. Small amounts of grain were imported from Southeast Asia to supplement what China could not produce on its own. However, farmers were not content with the situation; high taxes, tenant farming, and corrupt landlords enabled the Communists to form a rural base to come to power.

When the CCP established the PRC in 1949, a major goal was to modernize the development of science and technology. Mao and other leaders expected the modernization of science and technology would bring wealth, power, and status in the international community. With the exception of the Cultural Revolution and despite many twists and turns in Mao’s ideals, this goal remained consistent (Simon and
Throughout the 1950s, China’s development of science and technology emulated the Soviet Union’s model. For the first time in China, the central government took direct and explicit responsibility for the development of science and technology. Although it was expected that innovations from this research would flow into industry and the economy, the research, guided and directed by central leaders with little understanding of scientific research, was isolated from production measures (Suttermeier 1980; Simon and Goldman 1989). This disconnect between scientific research and production continued through the 1960s and 1970s as central government leaders’ opinions about the direction of science and technology development changed.

Along with his ideals of modernizing China’s science and technology, Mao Zedong’s radical attempt to collectivize agriculture brought major transformations in the production and distribution of grain. Throughout his campaign to reform the countryside, Mao emphasized self-sufficiency in agriculture through human labor. To gain support for the CCP, Mao had captured the support of the peasants with land reform. Beginning in the 1950s, households and villages were encouraged to pull their land, labor, and tools together to begin the process of collectivization. The central government established agricultural output quotas for grain production. It was only after meeting their quota of grain to give to the state, communes were entitled to their surplus grain through collective canteens. Throughout the collectivization process, Mao’s emphasis was on political mobilization and ideological exhortation, but the idea that mass production of grain would enhance China’s position in the world prevailed.

Rather than technological advancement through scientific experimentation, Mao’s ideas to improve self-sufficiency in agriculture involved additional human labor and re-
organizing the rural countryside. Although Mao followed closely the Soviet model of scientific and technological advancement, this model was shaken by his strong ideology, particularly in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. His ideological views of mass participation, egalitarianism, self-reliance, and indigenous scientific and technological development paved the way for technological breakthroughs (Simon and Goldman 1989). Mao expected these ideals to change scientific development from the bottom-up.

While Mao tried to enhance agricultural production through social restructuring, Deng and the Four Modernizations sought to increase agricultural output through the application of science and technology. The primary scientific tasks of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao were the development of scientific manpower and the restructuring of scientific institutions to follow a vertical Soviet model (Yu 1999; Simon and Goldman 1989). Until Mao’s death in 1976, party leaders constantly struggled between focusing on the development of science and education on the one hand and a leftist force prioritizing revolution and politics on the other hand. Following Mao’s death, scientific development succeeded as Deng Xiaoping’s leadership shifted from the socialist economic struggle to prioritize the development of science and technology (Yu 1999; Suttmeier 1980; Saich 1989). The widespread adoption of science and technology was meant to serve the economy, society, and overall modernization of China.

In December 1978, Deng Xiaoping introduced the Four Modernizations, covering the fields of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. They were designed to make China a strong economic powerhouse through self-sufficiency in production. Although the modernization policy sought to purchase machines and
technology from Japan and the West, it was done with the intention that China would adopt these technologies and become a major economic player by the twenty-first century through export-led growth (Saich 1989). New leaders denounced the political radicalism of the Mao regime and turned to the west to open China’s doors to development and technology (Suttmeier 1980). With the Four Modernizations campaign, advisory bodies made up of scientists from universities and state research institutions guided political leaders with scientific recommendations.

As part of gaige kaifang (Opening up and Reform), scientific collaboration with the outside world opened significantly. While many Chinese rice breeders and other agricultural researchers had plenty of field experience, their laboratory results were insignificant; in other words, their informal training was far ahead of formal scientific training. Opportunities for collaboration allowed China access to foreign seed varieties, research results, and training abroad. These experiences highlighted gaps in research with fertilizer, irrigation, and non-grain crops because China focused heavily on grains (Hussain 1989). Because of the Communists’ massive organization of the Chinese countryside, China had an advantage in the 1980s with technology transfer; “While Chinese agricultural research has been marked by occasional bright sparks in the midst of the unexceptional, the performance in diffusion and extension of agricultural technology has been outstanding” (Hussain 1989: 231). Once the formal sector of rice breeding was fully established,12 China had the ability to extend rice technologies far and wide, an advantage many other developing countries lacked. However, in the decades following reform, much of that extension network has broken down.

---

12 This formalization was marked primarily by the introduction of the Chinese Rice Research Institute in Hangzhou. This institute cooperates with IRRI, the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines. Funds to create this institute were provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, the UN, and the World Bank.
In an effort to secure agricultural and food production, Chinese scientists, working for the state promoted the development of genetic engineering. State development of biotechnology (of which genetic engineering is a component) began in 1978, the National Science Conference listed biotechnology as a key research area (Saich 1989; Suttmeier 1980). Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, biotechnology development intensified as did global food security debates in the 1990s. Research scientists then began to push this technology into agricultural production. On the one hand, Brown’s publication sparked the push for agricultural researchers to promote GM rice. As explored below, the development and introduction of hybrid rice boosted China’s ability to produce enough grain for itself in the 1970s and 1980s. In response to this book, Chinese state scientists claim that hybrid, super, and genetically engineered rice will feed the people of China through science and technology.

*Hybrid Rice Breeding*

China holds a unique story in its hybrid rice breeding. While most of the hybrid rice varieties developed as part of Green Revolution technology in the Philippines at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Chinese scientists developed hybrid rice on their own before international technological collaboration started. They patented the rice for the first time a Chinese scientist obtained a patent since the PRC formed. With the introduction of hybrid rice China had not only solved a practical problem of producing enough rice for its large population, but they had conquered this problem without external help or assistance. The story of hybrid rice is important in understanding recent trends and developments in Chinese rice breeding technology.
Hybrid rice breeding came to China in three stages. The first stage, 1950 to the early 1960s, saw the rise in rice breeding of local varieties based on selection, evaluation, and use. During this time, the dwarf plant was introduced. Many southern rice farmers quickly adopted this high yielding variety. While this first stage was important, it was not as significant as the development of F1 hybrid rice varieties in the mid-1970s. The second stage of hybrid rice breeding was during the large-scale disruption and change that took place from the early 1960s to the early 1970s. With Mao’s ‘mass line of technology development,’ there was mass participation in science and technology. Programs for rice breeding technology began in 1964, primarily in Hunan province. At this time Yuan Longping (‘the father of hybrid rice’—see below), after finding natural growing male sterile rice, developed his theory of heterosis in rice. This theory claimed that the progeny of two distinctly different parents grows faster, yields more, and is more stress resistant than either parent. Once scientific research, headed by Yuan Longping, began to show promising results, the Hunan provincial government elevated the status of hybrid rice breeding. Finally, the third stage of rice breeding technology came in the early 1970s when China made it most significant technological breakthroughs of the ‘super-hybrid’ varieties of conventional strains. In 1971, Hunan province initiated a cooperative research program in hybrid rice breeding. By the following year, this research program had gained national attention and thus national funding. The Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences teamed with the Hunan Academy of Agricultural Sciences in 1972 when scientists had successfully isolated the male sterile species necessary to produce hybrid rice. By 1974, scientists began a small demonstration field. In 1976, China became the first country in the world to commercialize hybrid rice. After
successful results, hybrid rice cultivation enjoyed a rapid increase each year in the 1970s to reach 5 million ha by the end of the decade. In 1979, the patent on this super-rice became the first Chinese agriculture technology patent exported to the United States. The aftermath of China’s own research on rice breeding has been a profound source of international collaboration and scientific exchange for China. Yuan Longping is heralded as a hero for inventing ‘modern’ rice. He is often referred to as the ‘father of modern rice’ or simply the ‘father of hybrid rice.’ When I told people in Harbin that I was doing research on rice, they often asked me if I knew of Yuan Longping. I even had children tell me Yuan Longping is a famous man in Chinese agriculture for his special rice. China is so proud of him that the Foreign Language Press published an English language biography (Deng and Deng 2007).

While Yuan is indeed quite famous in China, his discoveries have not gone unnoticed around the world. He has traveled to the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Phillipines and gives talks and presentations around the world. In 2004, Yuan Longping was awarded a World Food Prize for his rice research work. In recent years, many Chinese internet activists have called for Yuan to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his work in feeding millions of hungry people around the world. During a talk at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Yuan touted China’s success in hybrid rice breeding as an effort to feed the world.

The current world population is over 6 billion and will reach 8 billion in 2030. Meanwhile, the annual loss of land to other use is 10 to 35 million ha, with half of this lost land coming from cropland. Facing such severe situation of population growth pressure plus cropland reduction, it is obvious that the only way to solve food shortage problem is to greatly enhance the yield level of food crops per unit land area through advance of science and technology.
Rice is a main food crop. It feeds more than half of world population. It has been estimated that the world will have to produce 60% more rice by 2030 than what it produced in 1995. Therefore, to increase production of rice plays a very important role in food security and poverty alleviation. Theoretically, rice still has great yield potential to be tapped and there are many ways to raise rice yield, such as building of irrigation works, improvement of soil conditions, cultural techniques and breeding of high yielding varieties. Among them, it seems at present that the most effective and economic way available is to develop hybrid varieties based on the successful experience in China (Yuan 2004).

During the development of hybrid rice, the major goal of rice breeding was to produce higher yields to curb China’s fears about food security. The first major development, dwarf rice, produced yields that were twenty percent higher than regular varieties of rice. The super hybrid rice then produced yields that were twenty percent higher than the dwarf varieties. In the 1970s and 80s, when the state had much more control on the economy, they could plan how and when this hybrid rice would be administered and had more control over the economy to adjust it when they felt it was necessary. As we see below, the idea that rice breeding technology will continue to provide solutions to problems remains prevalent in China. However, as China embraces a global capitalist market, the problems and solutions fall into a grey area that is not as black and white as the food security problem that hybrid rice could solve.

The Shift Towards Quality Grain

At the same time Chinese scientists were proving they had conquered the problem of producing mass quantities of rice, a subtle shift in rice breeding priorities has occurred. This shift has been to develop better tasting, higher quality rice, and is generally attributed to increased economic development and a rise in living standards in China since the late 1990s. Until the past decade, the Chinese rice economy has made little
distinction between the type of grains or the varieties of particular grain. However, in the late 1990s when faced with excess grain in storage (and the added financial burden of this excess), the state has recognized the need to reduce the mass production of all grains. Of particular importance to my study have been the eradication of low quality grain production and the encouragement of higher grain qualities. Agricultural research began to focus on the overall general quality of rice, citing both the need to be competitive on the international rice market and to meet the domestic demand for higher quality rice. By 2004, despite a minor drop in the overall quantity of rice produced in China, state agricultural officials initiated a seven-year campaign to promote ‘quality’ (zhiliang) rice (People’s Daily 2004). This section points to policy changes by state agricultural economists and researchers that have promoted the production of high quality rice.

The promotion of high quality rice began in response to the state’s excess grain storage. In the late 1990s, China had a grain surplus in storage. By 1997, grain prices began to drop, and the state recognized it needed to readjust grain procurement policies and practices. In June 1998, a new grain policy package was introduced. In this policy, state grain marketing enterprises were ordered to buy at floor prices whatever amounts of grain farmers were willing to sell and then sell the grain at prices covering all operational costs. These policies also ensured that all state grain marketing enterprises’ working funds had to be enclosed within China Agricultural Development Bank (Zhou and Tian 2006). However, by the next year, officials recognized that the distorted prices induced farmers to hand over lower quality grains not in high demand. As a result, low quality grains were being placed on the market. By 1999, the state started to adjust floor prices downwards and they removed low quality grains out of procurement due to the excess of
low quality grains. Between 1999 and 2000, the Chinese government set up criteria for quality rice grains. Initially the criteria were met with the percentage of full grains and milling rates. After these criteria, three new quality premium grades were set based on scientific breeds. In order for rice to meet the criteria of these new standards, the seeds would have to be grown in large fields with a homogenous output (Hsu and Liu 2002). In 1999, low quality spring wheat was removed from state procurement, and by 2000, low quality early season indica rice was also removed. This was the first time the Chinese state made a major distinction between qualities of grain on the market.

This distinction, coupled with China’s long-awaited entrance into the World Trade Organization, initiated further deregulation of grain marketing to align with neoliberal free market ideologies the WTO demands. The government encouraged farmers to adjust their grain production in response to the WTO and to produce higher quality grains to solve the state’s surplus problem. These trends would continue for a couple years; however, by 2003, grain prices increased significantly. Although further deregulation had been planned, this was a wake-up call for the government and they put the plans on hold for the year. By the next year (2004), the state announced plans to further liberalize the grain market as it declared all agricultural taxes paid by farmers would be eliminated in the upcoming years. Because of the recent grain price hike and shortage, the government took measures to promote grain production through: 1) subsidies to producers, 2) subsidies to improved seeds, and 3) farm machinery (Zhou and Tian 2006). The elimination of agricultural taxes was carried out in 2006 with the hope that provides farmers additional incentives to produce grain because the amount of tax had traditionally been linked with the land areas cultivated.
Clearly, the past decade has witnessed a trend to move away from the mass production of low quality grain and to make efforts to promote higher quality grain in China. Along with state actions to eliminate low quality grain and to provide farmers with better seeds, there has been a direct push for higher quality grains. Rice research scientists I interviewed at universities and state research institutions reported that one of the top research priorities since the early 2000s was to produce seeds of top quality. As one scientist reported, Chinese rice scientists can now move beyond research directly related to improving food security through high-yielding varieties. They can now focus on aspects of rice research that have to do with issues related to an industrialized society, such as environmental protection and seed quality. This push towards producing high quality seeds has been endorsed by the state. In 2004, the Chinese state initiated a campaign directly encouraging the production of higher quality grain (People’s Daily 2004). This campaign, expected to last seven years, was designed as a result of the recognition that Chinese grain production had reached quantities high enough to ensure food security.

**Conclusion**

Over the past couple decades, Chinese society has undergone dramatic change as its political economic system has transformed. Among these transformations has been the state’s change in governance system as it governs society from afar and through market mechanisms and desires. As I have demonstrated through discussions on the discourse of *suzhi*, consumers participate in the market as they execute their own desires for goods and services that were once left to the hands of the state. With the introduction
of these new goods and services has come greater participation in the market, a new concept to many Chinese citizens. In attempt to both render this participation and to create greater market diversity, the state has guided market mechanisms to produce and consume higher quality goods.

This chapter—and the dissertation itself—focuses on the mechanisms behind the market for high quality grain production and consumption, particularly the discourse of quality. As I have demonstrated, the state has actively created discourses of quality that encourages participation in this market. For the production of high quality grain, the state has encouraged scientific research and breeding of high quality grain seeds. This process represents a dramatic shift from the past when the state intervened in grain production to promote quantity of grain production. Instead of directly setting targets and quotas for production, the state has developed both a research agenda for high quality production and market structures and mechanisms to allow for different varieties of grain to flourish. Additionally, with the introduction of retail venues for distribution and consumption, consumers have a greater choice in where they purchase and what kind of grain they purchase.

Digging further, the actions that consumers take can be linked to the discourse of quality people. In China’s attempt to develop and modernize its economy and society, the state has encouraged citizens to take part in activities that enhance their individual characteristics of quality, like education and manners. Moreover, as Chinese citizens become consumers, they increase their participation in consumer retail venues. Just as these citizens are driven by the discourse of *suzhi*, the market for high quality grain is driven by *zhiliang*. Rice that has been bred, produced, and processed under specific
scientific conditions to meet state characteristics of quality then enters the realm of
market mechanisms where the label of zhiliang is assigned. However, zhiliang is not
simply a label placed on food, but it also represents a discourse surrounding rice with that
label to bring in and entice consumers.
Chapter 4

Spaces:
Regional Identity of Northeast China

September 2008

I had recently transitioned from language classes in Harbin to doing research at Northeast Agricultural University (NEAU). To start this new phase of my research, I spent a lot of time in the office and the laboratory of the professor and his graduate students I was working with at NEAU. I had been in the lab watching graduate students work and when I went back to the office, Professor Jin was there. He asked me how I was adjusting and how my research was going. He then mentioned that he would be going to the countryside soon for a few days. I asked where and he told me Wuchang. Since the day I had arrived in Harbin, people had told me that Wuchang had the best rice in Heilongjiang. I wanted to go there and had already started to identify it as a place to conduct the ‘rural countryside’ phase of my research. He told me he was not going for scientific study, but he would be taking a group of Koreans who would be arriving soon from South Korea to visit Wuchang. I said that was even more of a reason I wanted to go. Although he was confused about my eagerness, we made the arrangements for me to accompany them.

I met Professor Jin through my summer language teacher and rice researcher at Heilongjiang Academy of Agricultural Sciences. When I first met him, he brought his
son along to translate because he was not sure how much Chinese I knew. He apologized profusely for not knowing English, and he used the excuse that for him, Chinese was his second language. Professor Jin is a member of China’s Korean minority population. He was born in Jilin province, where the majority of China’s ethnic Koreans live. He grew up helping his family in the rice fields, and he went on to university and graduate school to become a rice breeder. He felt he had plenty of training in the skills of rice planting and harvesting so that when he got to university, that was the one thing he wanted to learn more about. Plus, he informed me he had a Korean professor in the field who encouraged him to continue studying rice. This teacher wanted him to study rice because the Koreans had brought so much of the knowledge of rice cultivation to China that he wanted to have Koreans continue working in the rice industry. He came to NEAU over ten years ago and has made many connections with Korean rice-producing villages in Heilongjiang.

A week and a half after our conversation about going to Wuchang, I met Professor Jin and our entourage as we left for Wuchang. Aside from Professor Jin and I, we had a Korean rice breeder who had worked extensively at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines, two Korean filmmakers, and a driver from the university. Among us, three languages were spoken, but there was no common language. Conversations flowed between Korean and Chinese, with a little bit of English. I learned that the filmmakers were interested in making a movie about the Koreans in China who produced rice, to compare it with the methods that Korean farmers currently use to grow rice. What this experience showed me as I was starting my
research was the connections that Chinese Koreans have to northeast rice production and to other Koreans.

The historical and political context of the northeast region is unique within China, particularly because of its multinational ties. Over the past two centuries the region has been the site of contested political control as well as various cultural influence from neighboring nations and ethnic groups. Moreover, agricultural production in the northeast also differs from other regions of China. The northeast plain is home to black, fertile soil. This fertile soil compensates the challenges that the northeast faces with long, harsh winters and short summer growing seasons. Although the region has remained a part of the unified People’s Republic of China since 1949, the history and material landscape set the three northeast provinces (dongbei sansheng) apart as a specific region within China. When the Communists took over the northeast, the resources, technology, and knowledge to grow rice had already been set up. By the early reform period, the state was able to take advantage of what already existed and gradually begin to grow more rice in the northeast. By the early 2000s, northeast rice production was thriving, and soon became a well-known commodity throughout China.

This chapter traces these historical developments of rice production in the northeast of China. Throughout China, northeast rice is famously known as dongbei dami. The label of northeast is a descriptive word for this rice. In this chapter, I argue that not only did the history of the region enable the Chinese to capitalize off of this rice, but it also the contemporary meanings associated with the northeast as a frontier area with pristine ecological conditions allows for Chinese consumers to associate it with being rice from a ‘clean’ environment. Much of the high quality rice that is exported
from this region to other areas of China is certified with the Green Food label, ensuring consumers that it was grown in an ecologically sustainable manner and is good for the health.

The introduction and development of large-scale wet rice cultivation bring material and symbolic aspects of northeast China together in the commodity network of northeast rice. I begin this chapter by introducing and defining my use of the term ‘regional identity.’ Next, I examine the history of the northeast and its political ties to neighboring Northeast Asian nations. Third, this chapter discusses the history of agricultural production in the northeast. At the same time the northeast was seen as an industrial base in the Mao era, intensive agricultural production has helped it become known as the ‘great northern granary’ of China. Next, I tie the historical ties together with the present commodity of northeast rice by introducing the symbolic characteristics of northeast rice that distinguish it from southern rice. Here I also discuss the different scales at which northeast rice is famous in China. These scales come together to form the regional space of the commodity network, forming the basis of the following two chapters.

**Regional Identity**

Regional Identity

Regions represent socially and historically constructed ideas of a continuous segment of land on a variety of scales; these scales include neighborhood, state or province, nation, or a set of nations and/or countries in the world. The concept of regional geography has been widely debated over the past few decades as geographers have recognized issues inherent in an ‘encyclopedic’ description of characteristics of a
place, complete with emphasis on the physical landscape, economic, demographic, and social characteristics of a place (Murphy and O’Loughlin 2009). Indeed, concepts of ‘regions’ and ‘place’ remain highly contested and discussed topics in human geography (Passi 2002). While the concept of a ‘new regional geography’ remains abstract and undefined (Fujita and Krugman 2004), the general consensus is that regions remain important to geography. However, the way we study regions must include the ways that global processes play out differently. Borrowing the call for a regional geography that is concerned with explanations of “regions as constantly shifting products of social and economic relations” with regard to developments above and below the scale of the region (Murphy and O’Loughlin 2009), this study recognizes the complexities involved in a regional approach.

Regional scales embedded within this study are those of Northeast Asia, China, and the northeast of China. The commodity of Chinese northeast rice flows among and between these scales, from the regional identity of northeast China to national scale of China’s culture and economy, and up to the regional scale of Northeast Asia. In previous chapters, I discussed the national scale of China’s politics, culture, and economy. Much of the discussion in this chapter focuses on how the identity of northeast China has been historically formed. Northeast Asia, however, has received little attention as a distinct region, even though its historical ties are quite strong (Dent 2002). As we will see, northeast rice production has strong historical ties to northeast Asian countries, specifically Korea and Japan. These ties, established over a century ago as Japanese interest in Manchuria developed, have shaped the commodity of China’s northeast rice. Today, they continue to play an integral role in the cultural economy of northeast rice.
Northeast China represents a distinct region with a separate history and physical geography from the rest of China. Over the past century, the northeast has created and re-created an identity of its own as it has integrated into the PRC. This identity of northeast China plays an integral role in identifying and qualifying rice that comes from this region. Over the past century, the northeast has gone from being primarily wilderness to earning a reputation for being the ‘great northern granary’ within China. Characteristics of this physical setting, coupled with the multicultural and political identity, demonstrate the ability the Chinese Communist Party has to integrate a region that was once on the fringes of China to become an integral part of the nation. ‘Northeast rice,’ as a commodity rice from the northeast is limited to a certain geographic region of China—the area traditionally known as the ‘northeast.’ Today, people in the northeast of China have embraced the reputation that their rice is some of the best around China. They are eager to offer rice to people from outside the region. The concept of the ‘northeast’ of China is embedded within the rice. However, many of the reasons that make this rice special extend to specific political, cultural, and economic processes occurring throughout China and around the globe. In short, the commodity network and cultural economy of northeast rice that I discuss in the following chapters takes place within a certain regional space (the northeast) but it reaches beyond this particular geographic region as it has gained a reputation as a profitable, quality product.

Regional history—both political and agricultural—has an important role in shaping the commodity as well as the network through which the commodity travels. The places that the commodity reaches through its network are part of the spaces of the cultural economy of northeast rice and include not only the geographic location of the
northeast but also areas external to the northeast that have been infiltrated by the advertising and consumption of northeast rice. ‘Space’ is an important component to cultural economy and cannot be ignored. The spaces that make up the network and define the commodity itself are affected and influenced by the history and identity of the region of northeast China. If we consider regional identity a way for people to connect to other people based on a shared geographic location, then we can say that the commodity provides a path through which people can interact and connect with an object based on geographical location. Northeast rice is labeled with a geographic region, and is famous precisely because of the geographic location of its production. This attachment that commodities have to their place of origin adds an extra component to the commodity—one which people can identify with, whether people are from that region or not. Placing a geographic label on a product distinguishes it from other similar products and, in some cases, contributes that product becoming a commodity.

The practice of attaching a regional identity to commodities—especially food products—is common as it is in other parts of the world. Within China, many cities, towns, and villages are known for certain products. When a product achieves national fame, the name of the city is often associated with that product. Other regions or provinces are famous for their fruit products; the best apples come from Shaanxi, peaches from Beijing, and Xinjiang grows some of the best grapes (and subsequently raisins and wine). In most cases, it is convenient and profitable for farmers in regions of specialty crops to grow these products. Markets in the towns and regions have developed around these products. Many of the towns have wholesale markets where farmers directly sell

---

13 For example, when I was a teacher in Sichuan province, I often had students bring me a ‘specialty’ gift from their home village. Many of these products were famous within our small county; they were not famous throughout China.
their produce to buyers who will package (if necessary) and sell the products to middlemen who will transport it out of the region. The market determines the prices, and buyers and sellers will sometimes go as far to negotiate down to the fen (one hundredth of a yuan and nearly out of use). From these wholesale markets, the produce is shipped to markets, street stands, and supermarkets around the nation.

I explore the ways that northeast China has come to represent a distinct identity within China. This identity is embedded in historical and physical elements which separate people from the northeast of China from other regions of China. This historical identity, while embedded within the emergence of the commodity of northeast rice, emerges in subtle ways. While most Chinese do not associate northeast rice with having ties to Japan and/or Korea, northeast rice would not be famous throughout China as high quality commodity rice without these historical and present connections.

Northeast China

Northeast China today is considered the three provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang\textsuperscript{14}. Until the past two centuries, the region was sparsely populated and dominated by non-Han people. Over the past century, political conquest and the introduction of agricultural production on the fertile northeast plain (primarily consisting of eastern Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces) have brought more people to the region. It remains, however, thinly populated in comparison to the rest of China; economic development has come later than the coastal regions of China. Like other regions of

\textsuperscript{14} The four northeastern counties in Inner Mongolia are sometimes considered to be a part of the northeast, but most Chinese define these three provinces as the northeast. In many cases, Inner Mongolia is attached with the other 3 provinces when discussing grain production because the northeast and eastern part of Mongolia (closest to other northeast provinces) is where most grain production in Inner Mongolia occurs.
China, the Han Chinese remain the largest ethnic group of the region, but Mongols, Koreans, and Manchu all represent minority groups. Unlike other regions in China, the northeast is unique because three provinces clearly mark ‘the northeast.’ Other regional descriptors such as the ‘west’ or ‘southwest’ often include different provinces or regions, depending on who uses the term. Most Chinese will assert that the northeast is these three provinces. The three provinces we know today as the northeast have not had the clear political boundaries for centuries that most other provinces in China enjoy; it has only been since 1956 that these three provinces have existed in their current state. To understand how the northeast has become the northeast, a brief historical overview of the political struggles and multiculturalism of the region is necessary. While the northeast of China is very much a part of the Chinese nation, it has come to China with its own history of influence from outsiders. For the past sixty years, the northeast has remained without doubt a part of the unified PRC. However, as we will see below, history does not abandon a region, and the northeast continues to interact with neighboring countries.

Physical Geography

Apart from its unique political history, the physical features of the northeast of China sets it apart as a distinct region. Known for its cold, harsh winters, the northeast climate is more akin to Siberian cold than to the lush, semi-tropical regions of southern China. The Northeast is separated from Inner Mongolia by the Daxing’anling Mountain range (sometimes called the Hingan Range) along its western border. The Amur (Heilong Jiang) and Argun (Hailar He) Rivers separate the Northeast from Russia to the north, while the Yalu and Tumen Rivers separate Northeast China from North Korea at
its southeast border. The major agricultural region in the northeast is often considered the Sanjiang (Three Rivers) Plain. This plain lies to the east of the mountains and contains fertile black soil. While this soil is extremely rare and fertile, agricultural production, however, is extremely limited in the region due to cold weather and periodic droughts. As a result, most of the crops grown in the region are special short-season varieties and much of the land is irrigated (Veeck et al 2007).

Although most northeast land consisted of forests and wetlands prior to the turn of the twentieth century, much of that land has been cleared today. Today lumber remains an important industry for Heilongjiang, and most of the remaining forests are in the far north of the province. While some wetlands have been preserved, many have been converted to agricultural land, particularly in the Sanjiang Plain. This conversion of wetlands is controversial because of the drought problems the northeast faces as well as the loss of habitat for the red-necked crane. The loss of land for this species has brought attention from Japanese and Korean activists seeking to preserve the crane (Veeck et al 2007). However, the most pressing and limiting environmental factor of agriculture in the region with respect to agricultural production is water resources. Most scientists I spoke with reported that water has been an issue in the past, but advanced irrigation practices have temporarily relieved that problem. However, they all informed me that more projects which required water would not be possible because water resources were already strained.

Despite fears of water shortages, the factor that most scientists reported as the biggest attribute of agriculture in the northeast was the black soil. Fertile black soil makes up the majority of soil in the northeast because land in the northeast has not been
cultivated for too long, the prevalence of wetlands in the region, and the high organic content of the soil. Scientists in the region report that soil of this quality is rare worldwide and is a major contributor the high yields of grain produced in the northeast.

**Historical and Political Geography**

Over the past few centuries, the northeast of China has been host to numerous struggles between different ethnic groups to control the region. The Manchus have occupied the northeast of China for hundreds of years. During the 17th century, the Manchus overthrew the Ming to establish the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty in imperial China. Upon taking control of China, the Manchus prohibited Han and all other non-Manchu immigration to the northeast. They wanted to preserve the land for the Manchu people and did not want external influence inhabiting their area. However, when the Manchus moved their capital from Mukden (modern day Shenyang) to Beijing, the Manchu people followed leaving the region even more sparsely populated that it already had been. The anti-immigration policy the Manchus had established lasted until the end of the 18th century. At this point, the Qing realized they could no longer contain Han immigration to the region. From the late 1700s to 1830, the population of the province of Mukden (Liaoning) rose from 820,000 to 2,160,000 as a result of Han immigration. Many of these Han were poor peasants looking for land to farm. They settled primarily in modern-day Liaoning province. Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces remained closed to emigration until the 19th century.

Under the Qing Dynasty, agricultural land in the northeast was largely regulated by informal peasant claims, despite strong efforts by Qing leaders. The Qing saw
northeast land and resources as a way to benefit the empire. They issued formal land
grants to banner warriors; these land grants included territories of land to farm. However,
shortly following the establishment of this system, commoners came to settle and
illegally purchase or squat on the land. Although Han settlement was illegal, they
continued to settle on the land and, as a result, faced considerable challenges regarding
their claims to land and their efforts to avoid authority. However, despite illegal
settlement, an informal land management system emerged that was independent of and in
tension with the formal Qing legal system. Through this informal system, peasants and
communities were able to enforce claims and police the property system on their own
(Isett 2007).

Aside from the Manchus and Han within China, interest from neighboring
northeast Asian countries infiltrated the northeast. In Russia, the Eastern Siberian
government led the Russians towards the Pacific Ocean. In the summer of 1860, the
Russians founded Vladivostok, a city near the Russian, Chinese, and Korean border. The
establishment of this city gave Russians a base in the region. By November of the same
year, the northeast provinces of the Chinese empire had lost control to the Russians. This
loss of control in the northeast led to widespread emigration to the region as more Han
and Koreans came to cultivate land in the region. As the region opened up to economic
refugees in rural areas, the Russians continued construction of large infrastructure
projects in eastern Siberia. They were particularly interested in railroads, and by 1891,
the Russians had built the trans-Siberian railroad in concession with Chinese Eastern
Railway. The city of Harbin, established in the mid-1890s, was a central location for the
railroads. Following China’s loss to Japan in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895,\textsuperscript{15} the Manchurian railroad system became a site of conflict as Japan, Russia, and China all struggled for influence in this system. With Japan’s victory, the Japanese became interested in increasing influence in northeast China, and their victory gave them control of the Liaoning peninsula. With intervention from Russia, France, and Germany, the Japanese returned this land to China. However, Japanese interest in the region remained.

In the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese gained control of China Eastern Railway and renamed it Southern Manchurian Railway.

As the Japanese and Russians vied for control of resources and infrastructure in the northeast, the Qing Dynasty power controlling China was weakening. It finally collapsed in 1911, ending the imperial system that had dominated the Chinese political system. With the collapse of the Qing, warlord Zhang Zuolin took control of the three northeast provinces. Japanese interests in the region intensified in the 1920s as the Japanese military and economic interests encroached on China. The Japanese assassinated Zhang in 1928, and by 1931, the Japanese had assumed control of the entire northeast.\textsuperscript{16} In 1932, the Japanese established the puppet state of Manchuria and divided the region into 18 provinces with Xinjing (Changchun) as the capital. Following the Japanese loss in World War II, Japan lost control of Manchuria in 1945. In the midst of China’s civil war between the Guomindang and the Communists, the Guomindang took control of Manchuria and reorganized it into 10 provinces. By 1946, the

\textsuperscript{15} This war, taking place from Aug 1894-April 1895, was fought between the Chinese Qing Dynasty and the Japanese Meiji primarily over the control of Korea. Under influence from the Qing Dynasty, Korea was a tributary state. However, Japan had been gaining interest in Korean resources and saw an opportunity to fight for control after 2 Opium wars with Britain and the Sino-French War had significantly weakened China’s military strength.

\textsuperscript{16} At this time, the northeast included the three provinces we have today along with the newly established Rehe province (north of the Great Wall today, including parts of Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Liaoning).
Communists had taken over and yet again reduced the number of provinces to 6. After the Communist victory and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing reorganized the northeast provinces to the three that we now know today.

*Harbin City*

Clearly, the northeast of China has undergone dramatic political and cultural changes throughout the past century. As a central railroad hub, Harbin represents many of these changes in the northeast. The history of this city reveals how Russia’s colonial project transformed into a bustling Chinese city. Today, Harbin is a famous tourist attraction within China for its unique Russian architecture and its annual Snow and Ice Festival (*Bing Xue Jie*). Its history as a Russian city, center of economic activity, and an enclave for European Jews is celebrated, while its unique climate and environment distinguish it from the rest of China.

Despite frequent armed conflict between 1895 and 1945, Harbin stimulated investment in the northeast and furthered opportunities for those living in and around the city. Harbin was built by the Russians to act as a major economic and strategic center in Northeast Asia. Indeed, the construction of the China Eastern Railway (1898-1903) put Harbin as a core urban center in the region at the turn of the twentieth century. However, after Russia was defeated in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), the Japanese took all of the land south of Changchun. Harbin, laying to the north of Changchun, continued to develop foreign concessions. During the Japanese rule of Manchuria, all of the urban centers had a number of foreign concessions, although none of them were as large or as multi-ethnic as Harbin (Lahusen 2001). Although Harbin was never officially a part of
Russia, it acted as the provincial capital of Russian Manchuria. Between 1900 and 1917, it grew from an abandoned distillery to a bustling multi-ethnic urban center (Wolff 1999). It was during this time that European and Russian Jews fled to Harbin to escape persecution in Europe by the Nazis. Within Harbin, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, merchants collaborated to turn the region from unsettled wilderness to a wealthy agricultural zone. Harbin was on its way to rapid industrialization (Wolff 1999).

When the Communists regained control of the northeast of China and Harbin, they took advantage of the opportunities already there to further industrialize the region. As James Carter (2002) documents, the Chinese put a great amount of effort into turning this city into a Chinese city, despite its international characteristics. In order to make the city Chinese, officials made efforts to make storefront signs all in Chinese and to set up and teach Chinese language in schools. Despite political fragmentation and unrest in both China and Russia between 1916 and 1932, Carter documents the Chinese efforts to transform Harbin to a Chinese city (2002). Although the region had undergone a significant amount of settlement prior to the establishment of the PRC, the Communists viewed the northeast—Heilongjiang province specifically—as a frontier necessary of development. During the 1960s Leaders relied upon the two-legged development approach to simultaneously develop agriculture and industry in the region. Harbin, already a central city in the region due to railroad access, was at the center of state efforts to industrialize the northeast.

Recently Harbin has suffered economically along with other ailing industrial northeast ‘rust belt’ economies (Hanser 2008: 19). Throughout China, the northeast and especially Harbin, has earned a reputation as a city with a significant amount of crime,
where pickpockets run wild and underground crime is everywhere. The large number of Russians in the city, many of whom migrated to Harbin following the collapse of the USSR, contributes to this notion. There is a section of the city that locals refer to as ‘corruption street’ because of the high amount of Chinese businessmen with business ties to Russia who live there. While most Harbiners will note that corruption is quite strong in their city, many do not admit that Harbin has a reputation for high crime. Perhaps as an effort to save face, when I asked them about this, they directed their attention to the many things that Harbin offers to attract outsiders. Many people, viewing me as an outsider, pointed me toward the tourist attractions throughout the city. In the winter, the major tourist attraction is the Snow and Ice Festival, but the city also offers a number of summer and year-round attractions such as the Sun Island theme park, the botanical gardens, the Tiger Park, and Central Street with its many Russian-style architectural feats.

As a large city in the northeast, Harbin plays an integral role in the market for northeast rice. Not only does it host a number of wholesale markets for rice companies to bring grain from the countryside, but also found within the city are a number of retail sales and marketing consultants who can assist in the process of branding and marketing. Some of the companies that work in Harbin have counterparts that work in Shenyang, Jilin, or Dalian, but most of the consultants reported that Harbin was the central area of the rice trade because so much of the rice is produced in Heilongjiang. Moreover, as one employee of a marketing agency told me, Harbin’s rich history makes it a strong tourist destination. As more tourists visit Harbin, they want to take things home with them, so there is a need for more specialty products to come out of Harbin. Although rice is not
traditionally a commodity that is given as a gift, those in charge of marketing are trying to build on the history of Harbin to boost the commodity of rice from this region.

*The Korean Minority*

Important to the story of rice in the northeast are the ethnic Korean population living in the northeast of China. Of China’s 55 minority groups, the Koreans remain an influential ethnic minority in the region today. They are often referred to as China’s ‘model minority,’ a reputation they earned based on their educational and economic success. In addition to their entrepreneurial skills, the Koreans’ quiet ascent into the northeast and their establishment of wet rice paddies plays an important role in the development of rice in this region. In the mid 1800s, a dire political and economic situation in Korea forced thousands of Koreans to seek refuge across the border in Manchuria. Over 90 percent of the Koreans that came to the northeast of China in the 19th century were economic refugees looking for economic opportunities in China. Korean immigration to the northeast of China began around 1860, as the Manchus dropped the anti-immigration policy in the northeast. Until this time, agricultural production in the northeast of China was rare. Although the soil was fertile, the climate was not conducive to large-scale agricultural production. Most of the agriculture that took place in the northeast was on *hantian* or dry fields with crops of corn, soybeans, sorghum, and wheat.

The Koreans, known for their wet rice cultivation techniques, prepared the fields for wet rice cultivation while also settling into their new homes. Many of the Koreans settled together in rural areas and set up communities where they were able to maintain
their own customs, language, lifestyle, and value system (Woo-Gil 2001). While other ethnic minorities in China have traditionally stayed in one place, the Koreans are a border-crossing minority who have set up and lived in a ‘cultural island’ in the northeast, largely isolated from the Han Chinese (Kwon 1997 in Woo-Gil 2001). Many of these ethnic Koreans today maintain ties with Korea and Korean companies working in China. Like many villages in China, the northeast Korean villages are populated primarily with elderly people and small children; much of the middle-aged population has left villages for cities to find work, mainly with Korean companies in Beijing or Shanghai. Today, there are an estimated 2.3 million ethnic Koreans currently residing in China.

**Agricultural Production in the Northeast**

Heilongjiang is not only one of the granaries of the country, but also among its first provinces to adopt environmentally friendly plantation methods. The province has the highest plantation acreage, output and cash crop production in the country (*People’s Daily* 2007).

While northeast China has been explored and settled over the past century, cultivation of the land has led to changes in land use and vegetation cover. Today, grain cultivation in the northeast has reduced the nation’s food security problem. The three northeast provinces are now among the top grain producers in China, and grain is regularly exported from the northeast to other parts of China. Of the grain crops in the northeast, soybeans and rice have played important historical roles in the northeast. As discussed above, the history of the northeast of China is rooted in its international and multicultural history as Manchuria. This history is embedded in the history of agricultural production in the region. This section weaves together the political and
cultural history of the region with agricultural development. First, I discuss the interest that the Japanese had in Manchurian agriculture. This is followed by a discussion of the rise of Heilongjiang province as the ‘Great Northern Granary.’ Third, I discuss the rise of rice production. Finally, I discuss the most recent development of northeast agriculture: Green Food production. As we will see, as foreign and domestic interest in Manchuria grew, so did agricultural production, simultaneously raising the value of the land and further increasing interest in the region. Today, the combination of large amounts of grain production, increased rice production, and green food from the region contribute to the rise of high quality rice from this region.

*Japanese Agricultural Colonization*

Until the past century, northeast China was one of the least cultivated regions in China. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the environment of northeast of China was untouched to large-scale agricultural. During the Qing Dynasty when the Manchus moved from Mukden to Beijing and other parts of mainland China, they initially encouraged Han to come cultivate the fields in Mukden. However, they soon developed an anti-migration policy to protect the Manchu people and land in the northeast. When the Russians took control of the region in 1860, that anti-migration policy was dropped. Following the end of the policy, the northeast experienced a massive surge of Han and Korean migration and land cultivation. Migration began around the Liao River drainage system and slowly moved north to the Songhua River drainage system. As more farmers moved to these areas, the land became better suited to large-scale agricultural production.
As agricultural production in the region improved, the region became more valuable for leaders already fighting for control of the region. Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the government of northeast China, headed by warlord Zhang, organized migration and cultivation activities to strengthen the frontier and defense at the borderlands. At this time, the central and northern regions of Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces were cleared for cultivation. Soybeans dominated the agricultural landscape and provided greater interest for the Japanese. In his commodity history of soybeans in Northeast Asia, Wolff documents the role that soybean production in northeast China played as the source of Japanese interest in the region. Once a crop for the bourgeoisie, widespread soybean cultivation across Manchuria enabled the Japanese to import soybeans in mass quantities. This allowed for the soybean to become a staple of the Japanese diet. From the early 1900s onward, the Japanese established a strong base in producing soybeans in northeast China and exporting them to Japan. Access to Manchuria enabled the Japanese to import large quantities of soybeans, thus making soy products available to the middle classes in Japan. In turn, demand for soybeans intensified Japanese determination to maintain control in the region (Wolff 2000).

Although the Japanese had great interest in agricultural production in Manchuria, production decreased due to increased military and political upheaval when they gained control of the region in the early 1930s. However, the Japanese had long-term, ambitious plans to move farmers from Japan to Manchuria and to further develop the region agriculturally. Prior to 1931, the Japanese in Manchuria consisted primarily of an urban, transient population. Following Japanese takeover of the region in 1932, the Japanese planned a massive emigration of Japanese farmers to settle and farm the land. In 1936,
the project had turned from trial colonization to a project of mass colonization, and the
Japanese had created a twenty-year plan for full agricultural colonization of Manchuria.
The idea behind the plan was that the Japanese could strengthen their military defense by
furthering economic development in the region through agricultural production (Guelcher
1999). The twenty-year plan envisioned the relocation of over 1 million Japanese farming
households from Japan to Manchuria by 1956. By 1937, over 270,000 Japanese had
settled in Manchuria, the largest emigration in modern Japanese history (Guelcher 1999).

Although the mass colonization of Manchuria by the Japanese was never realized,
the impact that the Japanese had on the region remains. During their time of
colonization, the Japanese brought to Manchuria the technology necessary to form the
basis of mass agricultural production in the region. Drawing on the Han Chinese, the
Korean minority already in the region, and the Japanese farming households that came to
Manchuria with the promise of land, the Japanese had ample labor opportunities. With
the technology and labor in place, the Japanese colonialists were able to create
agricultural production opportunities that made up the base of their Manchurian empire.
Although most of the Japanese left at the end of the colonization experiment, the Korean
minority and Han settlers remained in the region. The land that had been cleared and set
up for agricultural production remained, along with most of the technology brought over
by the Japanese initially. These factors would prove to be advantageous when the CCP
took control of the region and set out to turn Heilongjiang and other northeast provinces
from the Great Northern Wilderness to the Great Northern Granary.
Heilongjiang: From Great Northern Wilderness to the Great Northern Granary

In less than a century, three distinct Chinese political systems (imperial, republic, and the PRC) transformed Heilongjiang and other northeast provinces from hinterlands to the “Great Northern Granary” (Muldavin 1997). Just as agricultural production decreased when the Japanese took control, China’s civil war between 1945 and 1949 also caused cultivation to decrease. After the establishment of the People’s Republic, it would take another 20-30 years before agricultural production levels were restored to where they were at in the 1920s. During the Mao era, the northeast of China, particularly Heilongjiang province, was the recipient of significant amounts of state investment for industrialization. Along with state money pouring into the province for industrial development, Heilongjiang also received plenty of migrants from around China. Most of these migrants came from central and coastal provinces such as Shandong, Zhejiang, Henan, and Hunan. In addition to industrial labor in the northeast, many of these migrant workers went to the countryside to assist in agricultural production. These Han agricultural settlers took the initiative to produce mass amounts of grain. During the Mao era, agricultural production in Heilongjiang was diversified with corn leading the way in much of the grain produced.
China’s reforms, beginning in 1978, reached the northeast in 1983 later than most other areas. By 1984, the systems that held collective agriculture together had broken down in favor of the market system. Peasant households were now responsible for their own production. These households held the countryside together, rather than the larger collectives. While much of the Heilongjiang countryside had developed along with rural collectives, the process took longer to break down the collectives than in other regions. What Heilongjiang had in its favor, however, were large tracks of land devoted primarily to grain production. Moreover, these large tracks of land were primarily flat and allowed for mechanization to be developed here. As a result, Heilongjiang was able to produce
large amounts of grain and other cash crop commodities that could be exported throughout China.

Along with an increase in household responsibility and agricultural revenue came the side effects of reforms. These reforms, while increasing grain production and overall agricultural revenue, led to a focus on short-term projects and environmental degradation. In the early 1980s, as reforms were coming to Heilongjiang, there was a rapid and noticeable decline in soil fertility, increased use of chemical fertilizers, and crop rotation was abandoned in favor of monoculture, particularly corn production (Muldavin 1996; 1997). As a result of the state abandoning the collectives, most capital and labor investment now went to short-term projects rather than being invested in long-term infrastructure projects. In the countryside, this focus on short-term projects meant that there was little maintenance or improvement on things such as dikes, reservoirs, irrigation canals, tube walls, erosion control, and tree planting. Instead, capital that had previously been allotted for these projects was now funneled into purchasing chemical fertilizers and pesticides, plastic sheeting, and small water pumps (Muldavin 1997).
Figure 5.2 Provincial Distribution of Grain Production, 2004

Provincial distribution of grain production in China, 2004
*Source: Based on SSBB (2005)*

Rice Production in the Northeast

For centuries, wet rice cultivation has been the forte of Koreans. Upon migrating to China’s northeast and beginning rice production, the Koreans worked hard to ensure they could successfully transfer rice production to the northeast of China. In order to overcome climatic challenges, they began to prepare fields early in spring, many times when still covered in snow and ice. Additionally, they prepared seeds at home by pre-soaking them in tepid water. Many of the Koreans brought their own seeds from Korea. When these seeds did not yield as well as they did at home, they began to use a seed that had come from the Japanese island of Hokkaido. While the Koreans built and developed irrigation systems in the region, the Japanese began large-scale experimentation to find
the most suitable seeds that would grow in the area. They used seed varieties from all over the world, including Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, Hungary, Italy and the USA. These experiments contributed to large-scale wet rice paddy development in the northeast. They also found the seeds that best fit with the climate of the northeast to produce rice that met the standards of the Japanese.

Recognizing the work of the Korean immigrants, the Japanese facilitated rice production for both Koreans and Japanese farming immigrants moved to the region. While the Koreans had been settled in the region since the 1860s, they remained a population without a nationality. In 1910, recognizing the inevitable fall of the Qing Dynasty, the Japanese assigned a new nationality for the Koreans settled in Manchuria. By doing so, the Japanese ensured that the Chinese could not include the Koreans in the Chinese nationality. In addition, this strategic move helped Japanese expansion in the region. With the Japanese and Korean alliance, the Japanese were able to intensify and further develop rice production in Manchuria. They began to import seeds and develop technology to enhance rice production. With plenty of Korean laborers to assist the rice production efforts, rice production increased in both quantity and quality during this time.

The beginning of the reform period, which encouraged scientific knowledge and exchange with foreign countries, witnessed a rebirth of rice production in the northeast as communication increased between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scientists. Overall japonica rice production in China has grown from 11% in 1980 to nearly 30% of the rice produced and consumed in the country today (USDA 2002). This japonica rice is grown primarily in the northern provinces, although some varieties are grown in Jiangsu, Anhui, Hubei, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. The rise in japonica rice production and consumption
can be attributed to shifting demand to higher quality rice as household incomes have risen\textsuperscript{17}, agricultural adjustment policies have granted farmers more freedom to grow what is profitable, and there has been a rapid expansion of agriculture, particularly rice, in Heilongjiang province as water and later resources were plentiful (Figure 5.3). Indeed, of the three northeastern provinces, Heilongjiang has witnessed the most rapid and intense growth of rice production.

\textbf{Figure 5.3 Grain Crops in Heilongjiang, 1989-2004}

Since the 1980s, Japanese and Korean scientists have returned to the northeast of China in making efforts to collaborate and share technological information, as part of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening up. Collaboration again increased in the late 1990s as China prepared to join the World Trade Organization. Rice is an important

\textsuperscript{17} This does not necessarily attribute japonica rice to being higher quality than indica, but suggests that the japonica rice produced in China tends to be of a higher quality than the indica rice.
grain to Asian nations; Japan and Korea especially have very specific standards for defining quality grain. As some feared that these nations would have to trade rice, Japanese and Korean scientists came over to assist and thus ensure that the rice grown in the northeast of China would be able to meet their standards for quality. Much of the increase of this rice has come alongside exchange with Japanese and Korean scientists. While many scientists in Heilongjiang I spoke with, in addition to many people who live there but have no scientific background, attribute the province’s reputation as a grain producer in China to its black soil. Heilongjiang is said to have a special kind of black soil that is very good at growing the staples that it does, such as potatoes, corn, soybeans, and sorghum. In addition to the productive soil, the region has also taken a number of measures to ensure sufficient water resources to produce paddy rice\textsuperscript{18}. The large change in temperature from the day to the night as well as the long days of sunlight that the northeast gets also make the environment of the northeast suitable to grow quality japonica rice seeds.

\textit{Green Food Production in the Northeast}

Aside from the increase in rice production in the northeast throughout the reform era, the introduction of green food production on a large scale has drawn more attention to northeast agriculture (Adams and Wang 2009). Over the past decade, organic and ‘green’ food production has increased throughout China, with the most dramatic increase being in the northeast (Lin et al. 2010). In particular, Heilongjiang province has

\textsuperscript{18} No one I spoke with reported that access to water is an issue currently, but they claim that rice production probably will not expand in the future because most of the water is already being used. Heilongjiang claims not the have the drought issues that other northern provinces in China have, although the argument could be made that they have only recently started tapping into the provincial water sources and that the use of groundwater and wetlands may lead to such issues in the near future, despite the government’s attempts to administer ‘sustainable agriculture’ in the northeast.
witnessed the greatest expansion; to this date, Heilongjiang has the largest number of green food enterprises of any province. From the mid-1990s onward, the national and provincial governments have targeted Heilongjiang for green food production because of the natural and infrastructural advantages Heilongjiang hosts. Such natural advantages include a cold environment where pests do not thrive, fertile soil, and ‘unpolluted black fields,’ while infrastructural advantages include large plots of flat land and human labor trained in northeast vocational and agricultural universities (Adams and Wang 2009). Indeed, over the past decade, the number of students trained in green food production and quality control in the northeast has risen. However, as the production and manpower of green food has risen substantially, overall employment in the agricultural sector in Heilongjiang has fallen. This fall is mostly attributed to the use of machinery and large-scale agriculture.

Just as rice production in the northeast continues to maintain ties with Korea and Japan, the market for Chinese organic agriculture is driven primarily through export economies (Thiers 2000; 2006). While the Green Food label is growing in China as consumers become more aware of the health and food quality benefits of green food, much of the purely organic industry has developed around organic certification for export. In China’s Green Food system, there are two grades of Green: Grade A and Grade AA. Grade A Green Food standards mean that the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers are reduced, but still allowed, while Grade AA standards are much more strict. In 2005, China produced 5.5.98 million tons of Grade A Green Food, but only 44,000 tons of Grade AA Green Food, with honey as the only product meeting international standards (Lin et al. 2010). Other crops such as garlic and spinach are grown organically
to meet international standards, completely bypassing China’s domestic Green Food system. In other words, much of the Green Food system developed domestically in China for China, while organic agriculture developed outside of China. Seeing potential profits for producing organic agriculture for export, the Chinese organic market has developed external to the domestic Green Food market.

The Symbolic Characteristics of Northeast Rice

‘To seek top rice nationally, please go to Wuchang; to seek top rice from Wuchang, then go to Minle.’ Minle Korean countryside is the home of the rice taken as from emperor tributing rice in the Qing Dynasty to one of sixteen special tributing rice. Its natural resources are one of a kind in the world. ‘60% mountains, 10% water, 5% grass, 25% field.’ The rich black earth is 2 meters deep after thousands of years of sediment together with the sand ground, they formed a natural fountain. Good mountain, good water, plus good earth together with hundreds of years of the growing culture by the Koreans make Wuchang Minle rice famous.

(From the package of a cylinder of organic rice from Minle)

In this chapter so far, I have demonstrated the historical and material conditions that have enabled rice production to thrive in the northeast. The unique history of the northeast as a site of struggle between various Northeast Asian ethnic groups separates the identity of the northeast from other regions in China. As the quote above, found on a display package of northeast rice indicates, advertisers are drawing on the natural physical characteristics of the northeast combined with the history of Koreans cultivating rice. These natural and social characteristics have influenced the way that rice is grown.

The package from which this message was taken was also organically certified\(^\text{19}\) reporting that “every granule of rice is ensured to be grown in a natural, primitive

\(^{19}\) Organic certification in China is performed by outside private agencies so that it can be exported under the label ‘organic.’ This differs from the Green Food label which is performed entirely by and for the Chinese state and domestic consumers.
environment. They get nutrition from the rich black earth, natural minerals, and bright sun so they grow healthy.” Again, the natural space of the northeast is evoked in the way that the rice is produced.

This section demonstrates how these natural and social conditions give symbolic meaning to northeast rice. I draw on my empirical evidence to display the ways that the Chinese Koreans and the ideas of a lush, pristine environment contribute to making an identity for northeast rice throughout China. I begin by discussing how the connections that the Koreans have with this rice have created an image for Chinese consumers that this rice is foreign and high quality. I next discuss how the ideas of an environment of wilderness create a ‘natural’ image of rice production. Finally, I discuss the various scales of northeast rice from the northeast as a large region to the specific villages associate with the highest quality rice in the northeast.

*Chinese Koreans Bringing Old Traditions and Ideas to New Rice*

Koreans have been the model minority among China’s minority populations. They are also widely involved in rice production in the northeast\(^{20}\). Although many consumers in Beijing were not aware of their involvement in northeast rice production, their involvement is widely known and discussed throughout Harbin and Heilongjiang. My informants would have a variety of different attitudes about the Koreans, which I explore below.

\(^{20}\) An interesting finding is the cultural identity of these Koreans in China and the ways that rice production and consumption makes up that identity. Similar to Carney’ (2001) study of the historical roots of rice cultivation traveling from West Africa to the Americas in the slave trade, a cultural ecology approach to Korean Chinese rice cultivation in the northeast of China would reveal more of the historical ties this minority group has to rice.
First, some of my informants credit the long history of Koreans working in rice production in the region to the ways that they are currently involved in the northeast rice industry. One Han person whose family had moved to the northeast in the 1950s from Shandong told me that Han migration had been restricted to the region and that because the Manchus had made the Koreans work so hard for them, they were now reaping the benefits for their hard work. Although I sensed a bit of animosity towards the Koreans sometimes, most of the Han in Harbin and the countryside respect the Koreans for their hard work in both the rice fields and as a group of people in general. I also found a slight sense of entitlement among the Koreans that they get credit where credit is due. As one young Korean Chinese working in Harbin in a joint-venture company (between Koreans and Chinese) in the rice industry reported to me:

Us Korean [Chinese] people have made the northeast of China our motherland. My ancestors left Korea to find opportunity in China. With them they brought the agricultural skills that this region. Because of these skills, my people have taught the Chinese how to grow this rice….The Chinese have adopted us to their country. We are grateful for the opportunities they provide, but we also want to be able to demonstrate our history and show the opportunities we have brought China….I think that rice production is an opportunity we have brought here.

This young man expressed the issues that many of China’s minorities the job he currently holds in Harbin. To this young man, and to others who expressed ideas similar to his, northeast rice is thriving in this region as a result of the work that his ancestors had done. They had come here hundreds of years earlier to plant the seeds of rice cultivation. Because it is now a commodity grain throughout China, he attributes the Koreans to starting the production of this rice.

Second, other informants reported that the Koreans happened to fall into luck or were business savvy with the rice industry as it has developed. One Han farm worker in
a Korean village, when asked what the Koreans have contributed to rice in the region, reported ‘rice production is a Chinese skill! We have always grown rice here.’ I further question him to explain why the Koreans dominate so much of the rice industry in the northeast. He answered that they had been here for a while and were lucky (xinyun) to fall into the industry at the right time. He, like most farmers in the northeast, recognizes that the northeast rice industry is a booming to be in right now.

Third, the cultural unity of the Korean minority population is part of the reason why this rice is famous and thriving. When I was on a research trip in a Korean village in northern Heilongjiang with Professor Jin one day, I asked about his connections to the Korean villages. ‘Are all the villages that grow rice Korean or just the ones you have connections with?’ I asked. He responded by laughing as he told me that no not all rice producing villages in Heilongjiang are designated for the Korean minority. He did, however, acknowledge that he has significant ties to the Koreans and they feel most comfortable around him and therefore it is easier for his research team to make ties with the farmers in these areas. The Korean Chinese population, like other minorities in China, is known for being a reserved and closed off population. Professor Jin has thrived in the Chinese educational system to become a well-known plant geneticist. He grew up in a large Korean prefecture in Jilin province where he learned to grow and harvest rice at an early age. Up graduating from university and graduate school, he now works in similar villages with populations who are familiar to him. They can relate to him because he speaks their language and they share a cultural background and political minority status.
By not only making connections with these Korean villages, but also working with them continuously to develop higher quality varieties of rice for their micro-climate, Professor Jin is further unifying the Korean population of the northeast. In addition to the Korean villages with which he works, Professor Jin also actively cultivates relationships with Korean researchers and scientists in South Korea just like the researcher and film crew he brought to Wuchang in October 2008. The scientists was a friend of his whom he had met a few years ago on one of his research trips to Korea to learn about and share technology and knowledge about growing japonica rice. The researcher was visiting Wuchang for the first time to see and understand how rice was being grown here. He brought along some filmmakers who were interested in getting footage of Koreans in China growing rice for a television program back in Korea. The cohesiveness of Korean researchers with villagers creates a bond through which rice can connect them to one another and to their past history in the region. They use rice and scientific research to improve rice seeds and cultivation techniques as a way to connect to one another and to the past history where Koreans came to northeast China to grow rice.

Northeast Rice as a Product of its Natural Surroundings

When I first began asking people why northeast rice was quality rice, the response I got most often was because of the black soil. Although many consumers that I met in the supermarkets could not explain to my why exactly the black soil contributed to the quality, they were all sure that there was a correlation between the rich, black earth unique to Heilongjiang and the high quality—often ‘green’—rice grown in the area.
Other consumers that I spoke with reported that the rivers and the plains in Heilongjiang contributed to the quality of the product. As one consumer reported:

we have a clean environment in Heilongjiang. The soil, the rivers, the plains all make this area more natural. Natural environments are more likely to grow natural food. Today, Chinese want to eat green food that is natural. That is why they like northeast rice.

Similar to the rice package quoted above, other packages of rice illustrate the natural environment of the northeast to advertise their rice. Much of the rice is advertised as ‘ecological’ rice (Image 5.1).

**Figure 5.4 Fragrant, Ecological Rice from Wuchang**

*(Shengtai Xiangmi: Ecological Fragrant Rice)*
Scales of Northeast Rice

As I have stated earlier, northeast rice is known throughout China as high quality rice. From Beijing and Shanghai to the far west of China, many people on the street and in supermarkets, will say that the best rice in China comes from the northeast. But within the northeast, quality is associated with different geographic locations as well. As I will show more thoroughly in the following chapters, when asked, people in the northeast rarely answer to their own northeast rice is the best quality rice in China. To them it is established that northeast rice is already the best quality rice in China, but in Harbin, the best rice comes from Wuchang, a county to the southeast of Harbin. Within Wuchang, too, the best rice comes from Minle village. Most people in Harbin city had not heard of Minle rice, but when I asked in Wuchang about the best rice in Wuchang, they told me Minle and Anjia, the neighboring village.

Two points of interest arise from these different scales of the best rice. The first point is that the rice is automatically associated with a geographic location rather than a name brand, seed name or production method. Dongbei or Wuchang—geographic locations—are answers that many people would give me when I asked them what the best rice in China was. Regional geographic locations have been given the same status of brand names. The second interesting point is that rarely did I come across any descent to these typical answers. Sometimes Beijing consumers would tell me the rice they personally preferred to eat if it was not from the northeast (if they even preferred to eat rice over wheat), but would often still acknowledge that the best rice in China came from the northeast. Within Harbin, I was always told Wuchang was the best rice. Only on rare
occasions when I talked with people who had grown up in different rice-producing counties in Heilongjiang would they try to tell me that the rice produced in their hometown was second-best next to Wuchang rice.

Briefly, I will discuss the situations and conversations I had which led me to study northeast rice, then Wuchang rice, and finally, to conduct my ethnographic research in Minle township within Wuchang county. I will begin at the national scale with northeast rice. As mentioned earlier, I spent the summer of 2007 in Beijing conducting preliminary research on rice production and technology in China. During the course of the summer I had numerous conversations about rice and rice production. About halfway through the summer one of the professors with whom I was working (not a rice specialist but an organic specialist) mentioned that the best rice in China came from the northeast. Having previously lived in the midst of southern rice production in Sichuan, I was skeptical to believe that rice was grown in the cold climate of the northeast. She told me that most of the rice in the northeast was very good quality rice and that most of it was organic or green rice because many bugs and pests did not live in the northern climate. Once she told me about the northeast rice, I began asking more people about northeast rice and came to believe that there was a lot of truth to what she told me. Later that summer, on a trip to Jilin province, I saw rice cultivated in the fields. However, when I asked farmers and local officials about the rice production there, they told me to go to Heilongjiang to investigate rice. Jilin, they informed me, was better known for it corn and soybeans while, of the three northeast provinces, Heilongjiang is best known for its rice.

The next summer I arrived in Harbin for a summer of language classes. One of my first days in Harbin, I had a conversation with a Chinese student at the university. I
told him that I had wanted to come to Harbin to study northeast rice. The student asked me if I knew of Wuchang because Wuchang is very famous for its rice. I took note of this conversation and a few days later I was talking with a woman who told me she had relatives that would drive to Wuchang (about 120 km from Harbin) to buy rice in bulk. Throughout that first summer of research in Harbin, I had numerous conversations similar to these two. By the end of the summer, my language classes were over and I had to defend my final essay on northeast rice production to a panel of Chinese teachers. One of the questions they asked me was did I know where the best northeast rice came from. Wuchang was the answer to that question; it was a fact, not open to debate. By that point, I had already identified Wuchang as a site for the production end of my research.

After my summer language classes were over, it was time for me to get set up and really delve into my research. Aside from wanting to get to know more about rice consumption in Harbin, I wanted to visit Wuchang so I could identify a place within Wuchang to conduct more in-depth fieldwork the following summer. After a series of conversations and exploratory research, I chose Minle as my ethnographic field site after hearing about it several times, as I explain below. Minle Township in Wuchang county is the site where I conducted ethnographic research of rice production in the countryside. Together, the series of events that happened independent of one another, led me to arrive in Minle and quickly make connections there.

First, I accompanied my professor at Northeast Agricultural University to Wuchang in the fall of 2008. This was my first ‘official’ trip to the countryside to see and understand rice production. In addition to my professor and I, the people accompanying us were a rice scientist who had studied at the International Rice Research
Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines and 2 Korean film-makers in China to do a video of rice production in the NE of China. Once I arrived, they told me this village was primarily Korean minority and that it was farming primarily organic rice; the name of the village was Minle. Second, over the winter, I was in Harbin going to supermarkets taking down rice prices of different packages of rice. I found an expensive cylinder of rice\(^{21}\); it said that Wuchang Minle rice was the most famous. Third, on my first trip by myself to Wuchang in the spring, I went to the big market in Wuchang to ask them where their rice came from. A few people mentioned Anjia and Minle were the villages where most of the Wuchang rice came from. I called a number one of the men had given to me and they told me where to go to get to their company headquarters. Anjia is a village right next to Minle.

The culmination of these three events led me to decide that Minle would be an appropriate place to conduct my village-level fieldwork. I was hesitant of getting involved in a Korean village because I had not anticipated my research to address any issues of minorities in China. While I think they are interesting, I had originally wanted to study something more typical and symbolic of daily life in China—in this case, Han Chinese and their relationship to rice. However, the more I looked into the history of rice production and the Korean minority in the northeast of China, the more I realized that their stories merged and I could not tell the story of rice in the northeast without telling the story of the Korean minority in the northeast as well.

\(^{21}\) The same cylinder that was quoted above. It was certified organic and priced at 98 yuan for one kg.
Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the history of the northeast and agricultural production in the northeast. Specifically, this chapter has defined and characterized what northeast rice is and how it has established a regional identity within the northeast. In China, products or commodities are often associated with their geographic origins. This is certainly the case of northeast rice; in fact as we move closer to the place of origin, we see more specific locations. The history of the northeast of China is embedded within the quality of the rice from this region, as the Japanese and Koreans played integral roles in cultivating the rice on a large scale in this region. Although their roles started in imperial China under the Qing Dynasty, they came back to the northeast in the reform era to continue to invest in rice production and technology in the region. This technology has helped northeast farmers grow more rice. However, while much of the rice cultivation in the northeast was rejuvenated in the reform era with the intention of exporting it to northeast Asian neighbors, the Chinese state now maintains strict export restrictions. Instead of being exported to its northeast Asian counterparts, now the majority of rice grown in the northeast is exported domestically within China.

Northeast rice’s distinction stems from a number of factors. While most people will cite the material qualities of the northeast soil and climate as a reason for why it is good quality rice, historical factors of the region and of agricultural production in the region also contribute to rice from the northeast as being high quality. As we will see in the following chapters, there are other taste and marketing factors that have also played a role in contributing to the quality of northeast rice.
Chapter 5

Economies:
The Systems and Structures of the Northeast Rice Network

Early one morning in April 2009, my phone rang at six o’clock in the morning from a number I did not recognize. I had just gotten back to my Harbin apartment from the countryside the evening before and I was looking forward to sleeping in. I considered not answering, but knew that whoever was calling would probably call back five minutes later as a Chinese habit. I answered. “Zeng Laoshi? Wo shi Tian Xiaofeng.” [Teacher Zeng (my Chinese surname)? I am Tian Xiaofeng.] I had no idea who Tian Xiaofeng was, but listened anyway. He went on to tell me that he works at the grain and oil store. In the past few months, I had spoken with many grain and oil store employees and given them my name card with my phone number. I remembered a very friendly nice man from one store down the street from me who had insisted on calling me teacher, so I assumed it was him. He proceeded to tell me I had to come to his store right away. “Why?” I ask. “We are going to get some rice, my driver is coming and we are going to Wuchang,” Tian Xiaofeng informed me. “You should accompany us.”

I had been asking many grain and oil store owners where they buy their rice for months and no one had offered to show me until now at 6:00 am. I checked with Tian Xiaofeng to make sure I had the correct address and then I went to meet him. He was waiting outside for me when I walked down the street. His driver had arrived in a big
white van; I got in the van with Tian Xiaofeng and the driver and we took off towards Wuchang, typically an hour drive away from Harbin. I asked where we were going and why we were going now to get the rice. Most grain and oil stores owners and managers reported to me that they bought most of their rice in October, fresh from the harvest season, so I was interested in knowing why we were urgently heading to Wuchang. He informed me that his friend had extra rice and he wanted to purchase it. This was a typical vague response I often got when I tried to ask a lot of questions; I decided to wait and see once we got to our location.

I asked Mr. Tian if he needed more rice, if his supply from October was running out. He informed me he still had plenty of rice, but he was getting a good deal on good quality Wuchang rice, so he wanted to take advantage of it. Who was he going to sell the rice to, I asked. He responded that it was a different variety of rice that he currently did not sell in his store. This type of rice was the 2.2 yuan per jin rice. Currently, he offered rice that was 1.7 yuan, 1.8 yuan, 2.0 yuan and 2.5 yuan per jin. This rice would give him more variety between 2.0 and 2.5 yuan and make him more competitive with other grain and oil stores by offering this new variety. As most grain and oil stores I visited, Mr. Tian’s selection was typical. The rice that is 1.7 and 1.8 yuan per jin is northeast rice grown in northern Heilongjiang. It is not xiang or fragrant and does not demand a higher price because it is not grown in Wuchang.

Upon entering the downtown area of Wuchang, Mr. Tian called his friend. It took about 15 minutes of driving around this small town to get to a market area off to the side of the city. We pulled in and Mr. Tian got out of the car to look for his friend. A man approached him and it was clear that they had never met one another; they later explained
to me that Mr. Tian’s brother in Harbin knows a friend of Mr. He, the man we met and they had communicated through his friend. Mr. Tian’s brother had called him last night to tell him to go to Wuchang and contact Mr. He if he wanted to get this rice. Mr. Tian examined the rice, spent some time bargaining with Mr. He until they agreed on a price for the ten large bags (50 jin) that Mr. Tian purchased. The bargaining was not the intense bargaining I normally see in markets with raised voices and customers threatening to walk away. Instead, they were friendly and joking; the price of rice is not something that can easily be bargained. Mr. Tian even jokingly used me as an instrument to get the price down (see I brought the foreigner to see you? you can give me a better deal.). The driver loaded the ten bags in the van, and we spent the rest of the morning sitting around Mr. He’s shop until it was time for lunch. Mr. He took us to a restaurant in Wuchang where he and Mr. Tian chatted, drank rice wine, and made promises to do business together in the future. Mr. He invited me to come back and visit him and he would take me to the places where he got the rice.

What I found interesting about the event that occurred above was that there was no paperwork involved, but a number of handshakes and promises for future business. Mr. Tian and Mr. He were two people in the same business, connected to one another by a friend of a brother. I later found out (when I took Mr. He up on his offer of visiting him again) that he often directly supplies grain and oil store owners with rice through the same informal practices through which he met Mr. Tian. Mr. He does business with a mill operator in a village just outside of Minle (in Wuchang). He has done business with this mill for over ten years, and he claims he does pretty well, financially. However, he is afraid that in the future he will not be able to maintain these business relations because
the larger companies who are demanding full control over all the rice that comes through
the mill now are enveloping the mills.

This contrast between the small-scale operators and the large companies who
demand full ownership and control of northeast rice rests at the core of this chapter.
These different channels of the northeast rice economy appear distinct, from different
eras of China’s economic reforms. The informal economy reflects early reforms where
agricultural produce was sold in the informal black market, while the formal economy
reflects a new era of global capitalism, standards, quality, and retail. In this chapter my
intention is not to create a binary between the informal and formal northeast rice
economies. Although they operate on different levels from one another, the formal and
informal economies interact and work together quite frequently. I intend to highlight
both the separate channels through which they work and the new channels their
interactions create. In doing so, I hope to show that northeast rice does not exist in
simply one economy, nor does it live in two separate economies (the formal and
informal); rather, northeast rice is linked together in a broad network of diverse
economies found within and outside of the northeast of China.

Over the past few decades, northeast rice has taken a leading role in the
northeast’s agricultural production. This chapter takes a closer look at the rice economies
of the northeast, which extend beyond production factors to understand how rice from
this region travels through production, processing, distribution, branding/marketing, and
consumption. While the northeast rice economy faces a series of physical climate and
environmental challenges, the structures of the economy have allowed this economy to
thrive. On the surface, the appearance of small, family-owned stores and large private
companies involved in the rice economy may indicate that the state has surrendered control and authority of the rice economy to the market economy. However, as this chapter explores, the state’s role in the northeast rice economy remains strong. Many of the economic structures, which uphold the commodity network for northeast rice, have undergone significant changes as the Chinese economy has transformed from socialism. Indeed, many of the same structures that exist today in the market for northeast rice are left over from the socialist economy. As I explore below, agricultural research and grain and oil stores are among those institutions that have successfully moved from being state-owned and regulated to the hands of private ownership. At the same time these institutions have negotiated a new place for themselves in the market economy, new structures and institutions that are evidence of the global capitalist economy have entered the scene. Concepts of marketing and advertising that were absent in the period of socialism have become the backbone to attract consumers to different types of rice. The introduction of large ‘big box’ supermarkets enables a similar type of Western capitalist retail that is characterized by catchy schemes to attract consumers. Such actions include sales, free samples, advertisements, and flashy designs that are in the West. The transformation from an economy that was entirely state-owned and operated to one that has been infiltrated by characteristics of global capitalism has created many different aspects of an economy.

In China, and in the economies of northeast rice specifically, there is a trend moving towards retail, capitalist economic development. Many of my informants were eager to talk about how northeast rice was different from southern rice because of certain factors that suggest the network of this rice is more ‘modern.’ Such factors include, the
economies of scale of large, mechanized agriculture in the northeast, the standardized practices through which northeast rice is processed, branded, packaged and sold on the wholesale market, and the association of northeast rice as being ‘quality’ and hence appearing as ‘special’ rice throughout the nation. Yet, these practices are juxtaposed with the everyday practices northerners have when they purchase and consume this rice. These practices will be further explored in the following chapter, but suggest that trust is greater in the smaller, less formal economies.

What kinds of social relationships, similar to the relationship between Mr. Tian and Mr. He, are evident in the economies of northeast rice? What spaces exist for these relationships to develop and prosper? In what ways are they geographically ‘nested’ (Smith and Stenning 2006) to determine relations of power and access to assets and resources? How do these social relationships connect to China’s broader socio-economic landscape of wealth and power, inclusion and exclusion? In this chapter, I demonstrate the ways that each of these structures operates within a set of economies that border between formal and informal, private and public, and corrupt and legitimate. There are a number of different structural practices through which northeast rice travels that reflect the larger political economic changes in China. These changes are important to recognize now because, as we see in the following chapter, they impact the ways consumers think about rice. In other words, I analyze the processes by which the northeast rice commodity network is actually formed in practice.

The first section of this chapter explores the ways that different sectors of the rice economy have restructured in the transition from planned to market economy. Second, I

---

22 The lack of transparency in the commodity network represents larger issues in the way that business is done in China. Whereas I was able to witness Mr. Tian and Mr. He doing informal business, the channels of formal business practices were much more difficult to access.
examine the ways that quality and standards are upheld as rice travels through the structures outlined above through what I call ‘technologies of quality.’ Third, I explore the ways that spaces of the rice economy have shifted and moved towards a capitalist, retail economy. Within this process, I argue, it is easy for the smaller actors in the network of northeast rice (the grain and oil vendors like Mr. Tian) to get lost and overshadowed. However, their persistence and the spaces in the Chinese economy allow them to prevail.

Restructuring the Northeast Rice Economy

The changes that the rice economy of the northeast of China has experienced and endured since the beginning of the reform era are evident by examining the structures that uphold the rice economy. These structures have undergone significant changes in China’s overall reform process, as many have transitioned from state-owned operations to private, independent sectors of the economy. In what follows, I outline the transitions or emergences of each of the following segments of the rice economy. Each of the five following structures of the rice economy (with the exception of supermarkets which have emerged in the market economy) existed in a different form in the Maoist era of state socialism, but have maintained operations, albeit with major transformations, within the reform era. In this section I analyze the historical and current role that these structures play in the northeast rice economy according to the following questions: How do these structures operate during the Communist Era? How have they transformed in the

---

23 I use the term structures here to represent the different institutions, companies, and enterprises involved in the northeast rice economy. Together, these structures uphold the economy and drive the market for rice.

24 I offer more detailed background of China’s rural and grain economic reforms in the 1980s in Chapters 3 and 4.
What role do the structures play in the current northeast rice economy? In what ways are these structures guided by the market? the state? How might we see the influence of a capitalist retail market infiltrating the new northeast rice economy?

I have chosen the following structures to represent the strongest drivers in the northeast rice economy: Agricultural Research Universities and Institutions, Dragon-Head Enterprises, Large State-Owned Companies, Grain and Oil stores, and Supermarkets. I came across these five different organizational structures of the rice economy at different points in my research, and I have been able to distinguish each of them as significant actors in the northeast rice economy because of the prominent and visible role they play in driving the rice economy. They are each easily distinguishable as significant and important actors in the production, distribution, and consumption of northeast rice. Moreover, they each represent the ways that the structure of the northeast rice economy has transformed from plan to market. This move from planned to a market economy has been gradual and is still underway. What has emerged is a new set of practices that has changed the basic circumstances under which individuals purchase rice.

I highlight below the various circumstances that illuminate these changes, but also maintain the distinct practices that were once a part of the Chinese socialist system.

---

25 This data was not easy to collect. Not only was some of it difficult to collect, but I found it nearly impossible to make the connections between each of the structures listed below. For example, a lot of companies may call themselves private, but actually work under the larger state-owned companies. In order to alleviate the discrepancies in what businesses told me versus what they actually were, I would try to ask to see some sort of identification of the business. However, this was not always possible. I can identify several reasons for this confusion. First, the people who work in each of the institutions below are rarely connected with one another. Although my professor at NEAU was able to connect me with an operator of a mill (a dragon head company), he did not know anyone connected with a grain and oil store. Grain and oil store employees, likewise, were not connected to many of the state-owned or more formal structures. To be able to talk to these managers at grain and oil stores, I had to spend a great deal of time in their stores getting to know the owners. Second, a lack of transparency in business practices exists in China. I found this lack of transparency especially difficult as a foreigner. I often asked mill operators questions about ownership and management, but never felt I was getting straight answers from them. If I found this information difficult to access in the mills themselves, it was next to impossible to get people
This transformation is setting the stage for China’s retail market, which, as we will see in the following chapter, is ultimately changing consumer behavior throughout the country.

Agricultural Research Institutions and Universities

As the modern system of higher education developed in the People’s Republic of China, the state formed a number of provincial agricultural universities whose primary role was to direct and guide research in the agricultural sector. This university system was hierarchically tiered with the national capital and provincial capitals. For example, Beijing hosts China Agricultural University, the top tier university; this central university then channels the curriculum and research through each of the provincial universities. These provincial agricultural universities act as an intermediary between the national state education system and the local agricultural bureaucracies. Research at these institutions is often based on the provincial agricultural needs. During the Mao era, most of the research at agricultural universities was based on state initiatives to increase grain yield, but the types of grains were determined by the province’s climate and other agricultural factors.

When the universities reopened in the reform era, they sought to train individuals to become agricultural officials in rural areas. Although the universities offered a number of majors, most students took a broad array of classes based in plant breeding,
agricultural management, and economics. Upon graduating, they returned to rural areas in or near their hometowns to work in agricultural production villages. An interesting component of agricultural education in the reform era was the introduction of rural reforms and the shift to a market-based system in the early 1980s. As one agricultural official who was trained in an agricultural university in the 1980s reported:

At that time, we had to follow the agricultural models set up in the Mao era, but we were listening to the latest ideas and technology based on reforms and markets. It was confusing to try to understand what model to follow. But when we got to jobs in villages, we were given instructions to follow, so it was not confusing. Officials told us what to do and we did that in the villages; we did not have much room to try our own versions of reforms.

Agricultural officials and economists trained in the 1980s learned their jobs along with the state as it underwent major transitions from a rural economy that was heavily state-controlled to one that was open to the market. The same official quoted above later reported that today managing agriculture in the rural economy was much easier because “many lessons had been learned” since the 1980s and today the message is much more clear about what to do to increase agricultural production and profits in the countryside.

Currently, the agricultural university and research system centered around northeast rice has maintained much of its past borrowed from the Soviet system. University professors and their research groups have connections around the province with different villages and communities that have become involved in the research process. In the case of northeast rice, researchers in the lab developed seeds that needed to be tested in different micro-climates. To test how well the seeds grew in the these climates, the researchers set up collaborative efforts with different village centers. These collaborations were often carried out through agricultural extension efforts. Researchers
or their collaborators set up a system of how to best grow varieties of rice given the
certain micro-climatic conditions of the region (i.e. soil, water, temperature, length of
growing season).

What differs today, however, from the old socialist system has been the
introduction of research money not directly from the state. As a researcher at a large,
national rice research center told me, japonica varieties of rice are getting much more
attention than they did in the past. As a result of getting more attention, he informed me
they are also getting more money to contribute to better quality rice. A lot of this money
has come from outside of China, especially from Japanese and Korean rice research
institutions. I found it difficult to get scientists to talk to me about where their research
money comes from. The generic answer I usually got was from the university or some
local (provincial) agricultural research project. In most cases it was not clear exactly
where this money came from, but one scientist at the provincial agricultural research
institute told me about the importance of collaborative research with Japanese and
Korean scientists working with japonica rice varieties. He informed me that while
Chinese researchers are making progress in japonica rice research, much of the
knowledge and money for these projects comes from Japanese and Korean research
institutes. It is vital, he believes, that Chinese scientists solidify relations with
international rice research experts so that their own research can progress, both in terms
of current, up-to-date knowledge as well as in funding and technology.
**Dragon-Head Enterprises 龙头企业**

Much of the rice production in the northeast is done through dragon-head enterprises or leading companies. These companies, established in the 1990s through the state’s agricultural industrialization project, act as the foundation for China’s movement toward industrial agriculture. They act as a bridge between the old planned economy and the market economy; they are established by government agencies and seek to provide direction and assistance to farmers at the same time they seek to maximize their profits. Government agencies facilitate the establishment of these enterprises by providing land, tax breaks, finance, and access to agricultural inputs. Nationally, there are 500 of these key companies and 2,000 run at the provincial scale.

These dragon-head enterprises have taken on the role the state formerly played in commune-based rural China by acting as a rural credit institution and by providing agricultural extension. Under the socialist system, rural communes provided farmers with the necessary technical training to grow crops. Today, dragon-head companies in the northeast who specialize in rice production provide farmers with technical training, assistance, and seeds through the introduction of new technologies, production methods, and quality control practices. Many enterprises set up contracts with townships and villages to produce specific varieties of rice using prescribed production methods. At the beginning of the season, companies provide farmers with seeds and technical assistance to grow rice. By harvest time, the farmers sell their grain back to these companies who own and operate the mills that process the grain. The companies each own and operate mills in the countryside where they gather harvested rice from the farmers at the end of the production season.
Farmers in Minle I surveyed appreciate the structure that dragon-head companies offer. They prefer to work with these companies throughout the growing year because they can not only maximize their profits, but they also do not have to take much risk when working with these companies. As one farmer reported about working with such a company, “we have guidance and assistance. All we have to do is plant and harvest the rice. And if we have a bad year, it is not our fault and we do not lose a lot of money.” Although little technical knowledge is required of farmers as it is given to them with the seeds early in the season, many of the farmers who contract with these companies have been growing rice for many years.

Dragon-head companies operate under the premise of a private company, but they tend to work under the umbrella of large state-owned companies in charge of grain production. In Minle, farmers are not required to sell a portion of their harvest to the state in state procurement plans that have guided the reform era. Instead, these companies report their grain production to the state and then give a small portion to that state. In the northeast, each person from a rural area has rights to their own plots of land. In Minle, because rice is highly valued, nearly all of the plots of land are devoted to growing rice and farmers operate through contracts with companies that they sign early in the production season. Rice requires little care throughout the season; planting and harvesting rice are the busiest times of year.

Dragon-head companies play a key role both northeast rice production and in the green food industry in the northeast. Because Heilongjiang has the largest amount of land which meets green food standards, it is important to japonica rice production. Dragon-head enterprises certify the rice as green by placing the green food label on the package.
However, in order to certify the rice and get the green food stamp of approval, local state authorities must be connected with the state Green Food certification bureau. Many of the dragon-head companies have their connections with the Green Food industry established before they begin production because they want their rice certified as green.

*Large State-owned Companies*

Under China’s socialist period, there were a number of large bureaucracies that controlled grain production and distribution. In the reform-era, these bureaucracies have shifted to industries that are primarily controlled by the state, although they have their own private enterprises working beneath them (like the dragon-head companies). As one employee of a state-owned company explained to me, “we are still state-owned company, but we control hundreds of smaller companies and enterprises which operate like private companies.” The purpose for the smaller companies is to promote competition among smaller businesses, but to do so under the umbrella of a larger corporate structure that the state can maintain control of. While the state wants to create a competitive atmosphere for businesses in the grain market, they also need to maintain control over it because of the state’s need to regulate grain production for food security purposes.

At present, there are three major companies involved in grain production and distribution in China. Two of these Chinese companies (COFCO and Zhongchuliang Oriental Trading) were each formed with distinct jobs: one was to oversee the import/export properties of grain and other foodstuffs, and the other was meant to maintain control over excess grain production. The third large company, Yihai Kerry, is the Chinese subsidiary of a Singapore-based agri-business conglomerate (Wilmart
International Ltd.), which is most famous in China for its vegetable (particularly soybean) oil. It has recently entered the grain (rice) market with a boom and provides strong competition to its two Chinese competitors. The combination of these three large companies has made the market for rice both competitive and also, to some extent monopolized. Although these are the top three companies each have distinct histories with regard to their role in grain and rice distribution, they are the top three players in today’s market and each are vying for the position of being on the top. With one being a Singaporean company, the Chinese companies feel pressure to conform to international business practices in order to maintain control of the market. One employee I interviewed, who holds a mid-level position in the import/export grain company, believes that the direction these three companies are headed in is one of future collaboration, rather than competition:

Right now it’s the beginning of the battle between the 3 major companies in China. Before there were quite a few small companies who controlled the market; now it is these three companies. They are working on building factories, gaining more production areas, sales points, and controlling the traffic of sales and products. The strategy for [our company] over the past 2-3 years has been to start the battle (buzhu). Small battles take place in supermarkets everyday. Companies are trying to get more shelf space and the best shelf space at the front, near customers’ eyes. A lot of times they have to bribe managers [to get the package closest to the customers’ eyes]. The big battle, however, is in advertising and marketing and in price battles. The eventual goal is to have one big government-controlled company control the market.

The Chinese companies are conforming their own practices into more of an international business environment while maintaining the practices that keep their Chinese roots. In this case, it is remaining a large state owned company in the midst of a privatizing, globalizing economy. If this employee’s assessment of the situation and predictions are accurate, the Singaporean company will be assisting the Chinese companies to create a
monopoly where the state can maintain control over grain production and the market for the price of rice. The state is at an advantageous position to maintain control over the battle of the price of rice. As I explored in Chapters 3 and 4, grain quotas and price controls acted as an important tool of the state to maintain control of rice. In the reform era, grain procurement policies have faded away in favor of crops which demand higher prices such as fruits and vegetables. Because of the state’s procurement program, farmers are expected to continue to grow grain.

Moreover, like the dragonhead companies, these large companies tend to have vertical control of the rice market. They own different brand names which are produced, managed and packaged at different locations throughout the country. Over the past two decades, the company that has focused on import-export of grain in the past has moved into the northeast, particularly Heilongjiang province. Once they recognized the potential of northeast rice production, they entered the market full-force by setting up and establishing dozens of mills and processing plants at key rice production locations throughout the northeast. One of these particular locations was Minle village in Wuchang county, Heilongjiang province. According to the operator and manager of a processing plant in Minle that operates under this company, there are over a dozen processing plants that work in and around Minle and over half operate under this same company, even though they have different management systems. Once the news was spread that good quality rice comes from Minle, many companies with their own brands began to set up shop in this area. To set up shop in this context would be to build or take over an existing mill and to establish a system where the company could maintain control
of the production process by selling seeds to farmers and then buying back the rice at the end of the harvest season to process and package under a specific brand name.

Even if it remains under a similar state umbrella, the branding of different rice varieties represents an important shift in rice consumption in the reform era. The advertising and marketing of these brands will be explored below, but what is important to note here is that rice is distinguished and differentiated now based on different areas of production, different companies in charge of production, and different names. Wuchang rice has become a famous brand name based on production in Wuchang county, Heilongjiang. Rice produced in Wuchang is associated with being fragrant and tasting good.

**Grain and oil stores**

Small stores sit just off of a Harbin street where, on mornings between 6 and 8, the food market takes over. In front of the store, owners have displayed a variety of rice and oils to attract consumers. The rice is lined up in order from most expensive to least expensive rice; the prices are set and there is little bargaining in these stalls. For this one store, the busiest time of day is the mornings where customers come to buy their basic staples when they are purchasing fresh vegetables and meats. Most consumers buy 1-5 jin of rice at a time to last for a week for their families. After the crowds have left and the streets are cleared for Harbin’s busy traffic, the grain and oil store (liangyou dian) owners prepare to make deliveries of large packages (25 jin) of rice to restaurants or even home deliveries.
The owner of one particular store, like many of the owners I spoke with, is a former worker who has been laid off. His cousin used to own this store, but he has taken over the business in the past 7 years since he was unemployed. For him, this business is a chance at entrepreneurship to move from being a worker to a businessman in Chinese society. It offers him the opportunity to participate in the market economy and to make a living for himself and his family outside of the realm of the state. The state has been the site of both grievance and assistance for him and the thousands of other laid-off workers in the northeast of China.

Grain and oil stores are a part of—or adjacent to—markets and offer consumers grains (ranging from dry noodles, rice, and dry beans) and other staples such as soy sauce, vinegar, vegetable oil, and eggs. These grain and oil stores are left over from state socialist days of rationing. Because they offer staples that had to be rationed in urban areas under the socialist period, the stores were all owned and operated by the state and required ration coupons. In the post-reform era when rationing was dropped in the 1990s, these stores shifted hands from state-run businesses to small family-run businesses. These stores are small and informal, with the families often living in the back or above the store. They are often dirty and dark, with big stacks of rice lining the walls. According to one store owner, he does not need to put a lot of effort into the appearance of the store because he does not need to attract consumers based on appearance of the store, but, rather the product. Although there are four grain and oil stores on his block alone, he claims to have a solid customer base. Most of his work is done outside in the mornings, followed by deliveries to restaurants and other stores in the afternoons. Family members take over business duties when he is out on deliveries.
Although he is busiest in the mornings making sure he is around to sell rice and her prefers to interact with consumers, he admits that most of his revenue comes from the afternoon deliveries that he makes. Restaurants are his largest business. About a year before we spoke, he had taken the advice of a family member to get name (business) cards made for his store. These business cards, which have his business, address, and phone number on them, help him to connect to restaurant proprietors in his neighborhood. He feels that the addition of business cards has been a way to help boost his sales in a competitive business environment. Indeed, the business of operating a grain and oil store is a challenge because there are quite a few of them in any given market district. In Harbin I made multiple visits to over 6 morning markets over the course of two to three months. In each of these market districts, which usually consisted of 3-6 streets devoted entirely to the market each morning, there was no less than four grain and oil stores in each market. Each of these stores offers a similar variety of grains covering the same array of prices. Although the appearance of these stores is different, the basis of their selection is not. Some of the larger stores offer a wider selection, but none that I saw offered new products or more advertising than the other stores.

It is difficult for these stores to find ways to distinguish themselves from other stores. Most of the owners are laid-off works and have no formal higher education, let alone business training. When I asked one store owner why he does not offer more items to try to distinguish himself from other grain and oil stores on his street, he responded by telling me his business is to sell grain and oil. His products selection is limited to grain (flour, rice, oats, dry beans, etc.), oil, and eggs. If he were to expand his store to include snacks (xiaochi) or sauces, he would lose money because he would have to pay for those
items, but no one would buy them. People come into his store to buy products Chinese consumers traditionally associate with grain and oil stores, and any divergence from that pattern would just be costing him more money. In other words, owners of these stores have a conservative notion of the items that these stores sell and they are not going to take risks to move beyond these traditional ideas to separate themselves from the other stores.

Rice sold in grain and oil stores is presented to consumers in a basic manner. During market hours, owners set up big open bags of rice outside of their stores so it is accessible to consumers passing by. At each store, the rice is arranged in order from cheapest to most expensive. The bags are open so passersby have the opportunity to stop to feel and smell the rice before purchasing it. Although each person I spoke with—either consumers or someone involved in the rice business—had a different opinion about whether people prefer to purchase rice from supermarkets or grain and oil stores, the owners and managers of grain and oil stores seemed certain that their way was more convenient. As one grain and oil store owner told me:

These stores are more simple than buying rice at a supermarket. We are out on the street during market hours. Since so many people prefer to buy their vegetables at a market, they come here anyway. Our rice is visible and we offer plenty of selection. Most of our regular customers know what rice they want to buy based on the cost. For example, they come and see a variety of rice ranging from .8 yuan a jin to 2.5 yuan. They often approach us and say they want the 1.5 yuan rice….This is different than in supermarkets where the selection of open bin rice is limited to just one or two prices. In supermarkets if you want to buy other rice, you have to buy rice in bags, not from the bin. That rice is much more expensive, and it’s the same as the rice we sell here!

The grain and oil stores offer a wider selection to consumers and they provide the basic grain; they do not have to worry about what types of advertising or packaging they are
selling. This particular owner posed the point that in contrast to supermarkets, people who shop at his store know what they want and do not need to be enticed by fancy advertising. A certain consumer knowledge or understanding of rice exists among consumers in these stores; they come in knowing what they want, which is essentially their own balance of price vs. quality. They know that as the price goes up so does the quality of the rice, and most have found the medium where they will pay for the quality, but are also fully aware of the price. This notion of finding the balance of price vs. quality will be further explored in the following chapter.

Store owners are aware of how their stores contrast to supermarkets. Instead of trying to compete with supermarkets by introducing their own catchy and flashy advertisements, they recognize the different experience they offer consumers. They are relaxed as they sit back and wait for business to come to them. In most cases, their customers already know what they want and they have to do little to convince them that their product or service is the best. While they understand that competition from supermarkets exists, these owners have faith that their services offer a simplistic, cheap alternative to the flashy advertisements found in supermarkets. Grain and oil stores sell different varieties of quality rice from low quality, non-fragrant northeast rice up to some varieties that cost 4.5 yuan a jin (the average tends to be about 2 yuan a jin). The owners recognize that the quality is not necessary to advertise because the price says the quality.

Supermarkets

The urban landscape of China has filled with the introduction of large big box-type supermarkets over the past decade. These stores, often taking up entire blocks of a
city section, are multi-leveled and offer just about anything that an urban family desires for their household. For a large provincial capital city like Harbin, consumers report the best and largest supermarkets are foreign-owned such as Carrefour and Wal-Mart. Each of the major districts in Harbin includes at least one of these large mega-stores, which sell everything from household items to food. Over the past decade, Harbin has experienced the introduction of large western-style supermarkets. These supermarkets cater to an audience by offering a relaxed shopping atmosphere, quality products, and convenience; they offer clothing, household items from bedding and towels to basic and complex kitchen and cleaning supplies. In addition to the US-based Wal-Mart and French-owned Carrefour, other major supermarket chains in Harbin consist of RT Mart (Taiwanaese) and Century Mart.

A CEO of a large Chinese chain of supermarkets in the northeast of China claims that Chinese chains cannot compete against these foreign supermarkets. I met with him in Daqing, a wealthy oil city to the northwest of Harbin in Heilongjiang. This supermarket chain is run out of Daqing and not Harbin because he admits that these stores cannot compete in large cities. While his chain is doing well in second-tier cities in Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, and Inner Mongolia, he is thinking of closing down the one store remaining in Harbin because it did not meet his expectations of how the chain stores should operate. Instead of investing in fixing it up, he would rather close the store down because he knows it cannot compete with these foreign stores. He is not happy with the way it operates and would rather focus his time, effort, and money on the stores that are doing well in cities outside of Harbin. In other words, he cannot compete with large foreign supermarkets that have taken over and dominate the market for large, multi-
level stores that offer everything from clothes and sports equipment to food and household items.

Supermarkets in Harbin, China have distinct and occasionally corresponding product arrangement. Entrances of supermarkets are often lined with electronics, progressing to home ware, clothing, and furniture. Typically processed and packaged food, baked goods, fresh fruit and vegetables, and meat follow. Each store, even if it is has the same name as another store, will have a unique layout with many differences, often making it difficult to create a quick and easy shopping experience. Something that seems to correspond between supermarkets, whether or not the store has the same name, is the location of the bin rice. Bin rice is almost always found next to the soy sauce and cooking oil aisles. Usually supermarkets are laid out in several floors, with food products at the final destination. After multiple visits to Chinese supermarkets, I have identified the following characteristics of Chinese supermarket layout. Initially, one usually walks into the store to find clothing, kitchen, bedroom, and household items. Customers are guided through the store on a set of paths to an escalator, going either up or down a floor. The next floor is generally the food and beauty supply floor. I’ve found that many of the supermarkets begin food with large displays of wine and alcohol, moving to drinks and processed snacks. Slowly the packages of cookies and crackers turn into the grain displays.

Like supermarkets in the West, managers of Chinese supermarkets are aware of the psychological implications that are behind the placement and display-making found on the supermarket floor. Rice is usually found in an aisle with other grains such as wheat flours and noodles. Nestled between the oils, sauces, and vinegars and the
vegetable and meat refrigerated produce, the grain aisle at supermarkets reminds consumers that all the necessary items one might buy at a grain and oil store can be found conveniently in one easy location. Moreover, supermarkets are able to offer promotions of rice and make rice displays in order to attract consumers who are shopping in their store. A manager at a large foreign-owned supermarket in Harbin reported the company makes extra efforts to sell packaged northeast rice.

Because the rice grown near Harbin is special, we want to make sure our customers know that this rice is good to eat and cheap to buy. We often change the displays so that different rice is out front and looks good to catch the eyes of consumers. Rice is just rice to many people, but we want to communicate that northeast rice is special, so we offer different packages of rice. Often rice companies offer promotions and sales, so during a sale, we can put that on display. When we tell people that this is special rice for them to buy, they are reminded that they have some of the best selection of rice in China and often choose the more expensive rice because they can….People do not visit our store to buy rice; they come to buy many things, so a reminder that we can sell them the best rice in China helps to make that extra sale.

While there are a number of Chinese-brand supermarkets that have emerged over the past decade, these companies are targeting smaller cities. They acknowledge that these larger foreign businesses have the ability to thrive much better in large cities, but there are enough smaller cities throughout China where the market is the main means of accessing food.

Technologies of Quality

As seen above, a number of structures exist through which rice travels in the northeast rice economy. Through each of these structures, rice is handled in a distinct way: as a staple grain necessary to the Chinese food economy, as a commodity that should be promoted and advertised to raise the value of it, and as another product that
needs to be sold. As I create the commodity network for northeast rice, it is important to remember that the reason northeast rice is particularly special is because of the way it has the label of ‘quality’ attached to it. While the structures of a retail economy are developing around this commodity, there are other political channels through which this rice flows. These channels each contribute, in different ways, to the overall association that Chinese have with northeast rice being quality. These political channels are a result of direct and indirect state influence in the market for northeast rice.

As I explore in the following chapter, notions of quality differ among various actors. Although these ideas of what constitutes quality may fluctuate and not remain stable, quality remains a goal for scientists, producers and farm managers, state regulations for quality, and consumers to reach. The state plays an integral role in guiding these actors to achieve new levels of quality. The Chinese state sees the production and consumption of quality goods as a symbol of a higher level of modernization for the nation. In this section, I highlight the ways that quality is a technology the state uses to guide the production and consumption of high quality northeast rice. These ‘technologies of quality’ indicate how ‘quality’ guides science, economy, and society. Quality is made visible as a goal to maintain and achieve along the commodity cycle in these distinct ways: prioritization, standardization, presentation, marketing/advertising, and pirating.

Prioritization

Research on improving the quality of northeast rice seeds is at the top of the agenda for rice research scientists in the northeast. Rice scientists at the National Rice
Research Institute in Hangzhou (in southern China where most of the research conducted is with southern strains of indica rice) reported that breeding high quality rice seeds was a very important feature of China’s most recent rice breeding initiatives. In part of their research agenda, southern rice scientists collaborate with scientists from the northeast where, as they reported, japonica rice quality was ahead of southern indica rice. Although the Yangtze River valley has, throughout China’s long rice-growing history, been at the heart of rice production, scientists from this region have begun to recognize the need to reach out to other rice-producing regions. While southern rice breeders indicate that northeast rice is a prime example of quality, breeders in the northeast report that quality was the primary concern for breeding activities. Because northeast rice is considered premium quality rice, the standards for northeast rice quality are high. Northeast breeders report pressure to continue to produce high quality seeds.

Research to improve the quality of northeast rice is driven through northeast provincial agricultural research bureaucracies and universities. A general trend my interviews with rice research scientists revealed was that in the past China’s major grain production problem was quantity, but now the problem was that of quality. Scientists in Heilongjiang reported their research primarily focused on improving the quality of northeast japonica rice; little to no attention was given to the issue of producing more rice. Most of the rice research labs direct their projects to attain higher quality strains (where quality is measured in terms of protein-starch content). This attention to northeast rice has improved the status of rice researchers in the northeast, who often get to travel abroad or to other parts of China to participate in rice research forums. They all report their need to help improve China’s rice quality in order for China to compete with the rest
of the world. In other words, they seek to produce quality rice to assist China’s modernization process. Breeders work is not exclusive to laboratories; once they breed a satisfactory seed, breeding scientists conduct field tests to find the best conditions where seeds produce quality grains. In these tests, breeders find the best conditions under which the best seeds can produce the best grain. They then create a package to accompany the seeds to inform the companies the ideal conditions for the seed.

**Standardization**

Rice production in the northeast is highly centralized and standardized. This standardization in northeast rice production and distribution is a quality control measure companies use to ensure that the rice they package and sell for consumption is high quality. The vertical organizational structure of northeast farming villages enables the mass production of high quality seeds. Because population is more scarce in the northeast than in the south, northeast farmers own more land and tend to rent even more land. The introduction of private grain and rice companies operating in this region has grown over the past couple of decades as rice production in the northeast has increased. Many of these northeast brand names are owned and operated by the same few large private companies and state-owned enterprises. These companies, referred to as ‘leading companies,’ have vertical control of the seeds by contracting the seeds with farmers early in the season, and operating their own mills and processing plants. The incentive for these companies to distribute high quality rice comes from expectations that the state and consumers have that northeast rice is high quality. The companies recognize that they must meet these expectations and have found that vertical integration into the northeast
rice sector is the best way to ensure that the highest quality seeds are then carefully milled and packaged in a way that does not compromise their quality appearance or taste.

State quality control of rice enforces state standards for quality in the milling and distribution sectors. Although most of the packaged of northeast rice around China are labeled as high quality, there are few actual government standards the rice has to pass to be considered quality. State regulations for quality and safe rice (as certified with the zhiliang anquan label below) are based on the production and milling process, which results in little or no broken grains and milled to a clear color-not white. While mill managers and operators admitted that China’s milling technology was not as high as Japan’s technology, they reported that China acquired new mills and technologies in recent years. This new technology, obtained once Chinese rice breeders were able to produce seeds they felt were competitive with US and Japanese japonica strains, allows for grains to be milled smoothly and cleanly. The mill technology, combined with seed quality and high milling standards enforced by the management, allows for greater quality control. With vertical control of the production process, mill companies control the standards for milling. Several mill operators reported that state officials came several times throughout the year, but that managers themselves were responsible for meeting quality standards in the milling process.

In addition to certifying rice through safety and quality, in 2000, the Chinese state also established a certification for top brand names. The China Top Brand label (see below) was granted to companies who were able to continuously produce (or reproduce) high quality and safe products. The idea behind this label was for consumers to be aware of the top brand names. In 2010, the state announced that it would soon phase this label
out. The idea behind this decision, according to one of my informants in the rice industry, was that after a decade of having certain brands labeled and certified as being ‘top,’ consumers were familiar with famous brands and no longer needed such guidance from the government.

Figure 6.1 Labels of “Quality and Safety” and “China Top Brand”

Zhiliang Anquan (Quality and Safety) Zhonguo Mingpai (China Top Brand)

Presentation

Packages of rice sold in supermarkets advertise quality rice. These packages offer advertisements to entice consumers to purchase based on place of origin, brand names, and that the rice inside is clean and safe. Many of these urban consumers I surveyed indicated that packaged rice, as opposed to loose grains available in bins, assures quality and safety of the grain. Supermarkets, which have grown in size and quantity over the past decade throughout urban China, offer a large variety of packed rice, plus a couple bins of generic varieties of rice. In Beijing supermarkets, northeast rice is offered as a choice in bins of rice, indicating that this rice is commonly purchased. In fact, over
seventy percent of the packaged rice sold in Beijing supermarkets is northeast rice from Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces. Many packages offer a small stamp assuring consumers that the rice they purchase is high quality northeast rice. While rice offered in bins omits the details assuring consumers that this was quality rice, consumers reported they believed that the label ‘northeast rice’ meant that it was quality. Consumers preferring to purchase rice from the bins describe the value of experiencing the visual and tactile qualities of the rice grains. In general, surveys with Beijing and Harbin consumers revealed that quality is an important factor and, while packaging is informative and assuring, the reputation of the rice is more important.

In addition to the presentation of rice involved in packaging or bin advertisement, most consumers consider rice purchased in supermarkets is quality. The appearance of private chain supermarkets in China has drawn many urban middle class consumers to purchase rice and other foodstuffs from these stores. In the past, most grain and food were purchased in street markets and small grain stands. By facilitating private supermarkets to flourish in urban China, the Chinese state enables the middle class to purchase and consume rice they consider to be quality. Not only does the Chinese state allow for chain stores to thrive, but they have also placed greater restrictions and regulations on the locations and operating hours of street markets. Street markets of vendors selling fresh produce, meat, and grains developed informally in Chinese urban areas in the reform era. While many urban consumers prefer these markets today for the freshness of their produce, they recognize the sites are not as clean as supermarkets. To many of these consumers, cleanliness and safety are wrapped together in their articulations of quality.
Marketing and Advertisement

Along with supermarkets, advertising and marketing have entered the Chinese economy. In the socialist era, there was no need for advertising to differentiate brands (which did not really exist, either). The idea of marketing and advertising has grown over the past decade and today is found in a variety of ways, mostly in and around supermarkets. To begin, many supermarkets accept offers from certain brands or companies to allow a sales representative from the company to work in the supermarket promoting a product. Often these representatives stand in the aisle near the product they are promoting. When customers approach, the representatives offer advice about which product to buy (which is always geared to their own product). Sometimes they give consumers an advertisement or coupon for the product. These sales representatives are able to accomplish two things at once: they work for their companies to spread word about the brand name of the product they sell and they are welcomed by supermarket management because they essentially act as sales clerks on the floor but do not cost the supermarket any extra money. The representatives, who usually work for weeks at a time in the same store, often direct customers around the store when they need assistance.

In addition to the services brand companies offer within supermarkets, these brands invest a lot of time and money into developing ad campaigns. These advertisements come across in many types of media, including television commercials, printed posters for supermarket displays, and printed ads on the bags to attract consumers and to raise awareness/recognition of brand names. Observing the introduction of marketing in post-socialist Poland, Dunn (2004) explains the ways perspectives of
consumers changed. “Rather than being fixed entities that passively absorbed product, markets and consumers became objects that could be subjected to technologies of government; they could be studied, classified, created, destroyed, and manipulated” (63). In China, this process of developing consumer markets has come gradually over the past two decades. The effects of this process are now widely observed within supermarkets, yet remain almost entirely absent in grain and oil stores.

Pirating

Finally, a discussion of the ways the Chinese state controls quality standards of rice would not be complete without a discussion of the ways that quality escapes these controls and emerges illegally. Just as bootlegged electronics, CDs, and DVDs appear unapologetically throughout China, ‘fake’ northeast rice also floods the market; enough room remains in the market for rice to fall through the technologies of quality. In light of recent attempts in the baby formula and milk industries to enhance and extend food products with chemical compounds, the state produced a Food Safety law in 2009.26 Key components of this law include the establishment of a supervision system for food safety and specification of responsibilities for related departments, and the law clarifies that the food producer or trader is responsible for food safety with the Health Department under the State Council being in charge of oversight (Wang and Liu 2010). Despite state pressure to enhance its food safety regulations, however, many loopholes exist through which producers and traders alike can slip their products. Although rice that is not grown in the northeast but is called ‘northeast’ rice is not an example of a violation of food

26 The Food Safety Law is an adaptation of the previous Food Hygiene Law, which was subsequently abolished as the Food Safety Law was enacted.
safety laws per say, it represents the accessibility that producers have to ‘fake’ food products.

Indeed, ‘fake’ northeast rice can be found throughout China. Although many managers and officials in Wuchang and Minle mentioned that the introduction of fake Wuchang rice was a problem, few were willing or able to discuss it at length with me. One company manager in Minle told me that although most of the rice produced in Heilongjiang is considered high quality simply for being northeast rice, Wuchang is the most famous county of northeast rice. Therefore, he believes that most companies operating rice production and processing plants outside of Wuchang prefer to label their rice as ‘Wuchang.’ As the China Daily 2010 reports, “The illegal use of artificial essence to make scented rice has lead to a fresh round of inspections on the quality of rice produced across the country.” The article follows a grain and oil wholesale market in Xian which adds artificial essence to tons of rice, enabling it to be packaged and sold as Wuchang rice. Because ‘real’ Wuchang rice is scarce and highly priced, this ‘fake’ Wuchang rice could be made with cheaper, non-fragrant rice produced in other areas of Heilongjiang as well as Hubei and Jiangsu provinces (China Daily 2010).

While I did not find specific example of this direct fake production of fragrant Wuchang rice, a mill operator in Minle informed me that much of the rice grown in other parts of Heilongjiang is sometimes packaged as Wuchang rice. He did not mention where this rice goes once it is package, but as I mentioned in the previous chapter and was articulated to me by the mill operator, many consumers outside of the northeast associate ‘northeast’ rice with being high quality, while it is mostly consumers within the northeast that know Wuchang rice is the best. By packaging more rice as Wuchang than
is actually grown there and shipping it outside of the northeast, is that reinforcing the idea that certain varieties of rice produced only in Wuchang demand higher quality?

**Economies as Capitalist Retail Markets?**

Many people with whom I spoke reflected the narrative that high quality rice was another result of China’s economic boom. In an interview with one of China’s most well-known agricultural economists, he attributed the growth of high quality rice from the northeast to China’s growing economy and households’ rising incomes:

> China’s economy has grown significantly over the past few decades. Quantity used to be our main concern in grain production, but rising household incomes allow Chinese to pay attention to quality. So we want to make sure we can get consumers what they want so we are focusing on growing high quality grain. The northeast of China grows some of the highest quality japonica rice, so this region has become famous.

This economist, trained in neoclassical economic theory, points towards China’s macroeconomic development as it has trickled down to reach individual households. Agricultural economists and consumers attribute the rise of the market for high quality rice to China’s overall economic development. Clearly, the numbers measuring China’s GDP indicate that the economy has risen dramatically since 1978. Since the late 1990s when China’s appearance and presence in the global capitalist market has been most dramatic, Chinese citizens are proud of the growth their country and their individual families have experienced. When talking to me about their families’ incomes and/or lifestyles, I found people telling me these stories almost always connected their own lives to the nation’s economic growth. Similarly, when telling me how rice had increased in quality over the past few years, most people also attributed the growth of higher quality rice to the nation’s economic growth.
While Chinese people are clearly proud of their families’ and the nation’s economic growth, they tend to point to numbers such as the GDP or visual evidence such as the appearance of large supermarkets or fancy bags of high quality rice as indicators of economic success. Even if they prefer not to shop for rice in supermarkets and prefer the more simple grain and oil stores, success is measured to them in terms of large, colorful and flashy. The supermarket and the colorful packages of rice it offers indicate changes in the formal economy and changes in the individual experiences that come with shopping in a supermarket. In contrast, the grain and oil stores represent an informal economy where bargaining thrives, deals are done under the table, state regulations are scarce, and manipulating consumers can occur. However, these stories of the underground bargaining and informal economic activities do not often find their way to this story where the rice economy follows a chain and ends up in a colorful bag in a supermarket.

In China’s goal to reach modernity, the widespread appearance of a capitalist retail economy is an ideal for all of China, despite its vast inequalities, to achieve. The narrative of economic development exists vividly in Chinese society with practices of development and modernization infused with capitalist economic growth. The achievement of capitalism is embodied in supermarkets where consumers have their choice of goods; by shopping in supermarkets with a plethora of choices available, consumers are participating in activities they were once not able to participate in. Thus, capitalist retail markets with consumer choice are signs of modernization in China. The onset of new consumption practices and consumers choices is, in many ways, driving production practices in China today. The state no longer determines production quotas
nor does it follow products through the production line. In an effort to get their products more recognizable in markets, those who are involved in the production process are now involved in different ways to ensure quality by vertically controlling the chains of production. Indeed, much of northeast rice production is a commercial industry where farmers are contracted through larger companies to grow and sell back the rice. This process, part of a larger story of capitalism and commercialism in China, seeks to solidify and standardize the quality of rice seeds.

In this story where the growth of the market for high quality northeast rice is embedded into the China’s economic growth narrative, the rice that is discussed is the rice that is found in supermarkets in packages displaying brand names. However, the story of northeast rice that I found is much deeper than this narrative. As I explore in the following chapter, a lot of factors go into consumer decisions about where to buy rice and what kind to buy. Moreover, in studying the economy of northeast rice, there is no one simple, linear commodity chain through which the production and consumption of northeast rice can be traced. There are many economies surrounding northeast rice.

Although the dominant discourse that leaders and officials in China would have one believe is that northeast rice is high quality and that most of this rice is sold in pre-packaged brand name bags in supermarkets, there are alternatives to this narrative. The counter-examples to this narrative exist in the small grain and oil stores throughout Harbin. They also exist in the ways that consumers in the northeast can determine rice quality by touching, feeling, and smelling the rice that is sold in bulk from bins, not in fancy packages. Although most of the farmers I interviewed work in the industry of commercially-producing rice for vertically-integrated companies, there may even be
farmers somewhere in the northeast who are small-scale producers and are not contracted by large companies.

By telling the story of northeast rice economies, I do not intend to tell the story of people whose livelihoods have gotten worse as a result of the growth of the market for northeast rice. In fact, most of the stories I collected from participants at any point in the commodity network were positive stories where people were proud to show off the famous rice of their northeast China. My intention in telling the story of the counter-narratives and alternatives to the capitalist retail discourse surrounding northeast rice is to show that when these discourses of capitalism infiltrate a story, they are the over-arching narrative that envelopes the story. The ways that people like Mr. He and Mr. Tian make a living are discounted in such narratives. Mr. Tian’s Harbin-based grain and oil store is a very real and legitimate store where consumers often come to buy rice. He knows many of his customers and he is committed to providing quality rice at a competitive price. Mr. Tian is not familiar with the practices of selling rice in supermarkets. He barely visits supermarkets because he can get most of the products he needs at the market in his neighborhood. His world does not exist in an inner-circle where capitalist retail markets are the only markets available in China. I would argue that most people in China do not believe that these capitalist retail (super)markets are the only spaces where commercial and economic transactions occur. I have met many people who prefer to buy vegetables and other products at street markets rather than supermarkets. However, I find that when I ask about ‘the market’ for northeast rice, most people assume I am discussing the modern markets where food is sanitary and packaged and sold at a set price.
Conclusion

In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) attempt to break up the big, monolithic idea of capitalism. By doing so, they open up space for analysis, action, and other ideas of what ‘the economy’ consists of. In China, narratives of ‘the economy’ are based upon a linear concept of economic development where modernization is achieved and witnessed through the consumption of high quality goods, similar to Rostow’s modernization theory. This singular definition of the economy can be witnessed in the narratives that people tell about the ways that economic development has led to consumer access to higher quality goods that can be purchased in new, large, modern supermarkets that cover China’s modern urban landscapes. As this narrative would have it, high quality northeast rice is produced strictly on farms in the northeast; from there it goes directly from farms to mills to packaging plants and then directly to supermarkets. To consumers, academics, and those involved in the retail industry, Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms have brought consumers greater access to better goods.

What I have demonstrated in this chapter, however, is that in China today, there is no such singular idea of ‘the economy.’ When we are looking into the economy of northeast rice, in fact, we see a variety of competing notions, underlying ideas, and opposing practices in the economy. Therefore, as this chapter is appropriately titled, ‘economies’ is a fitting description of such channels and practices.

In its path from production to consumption (and back again), northeast rice travels through a variety of different networks and channels. The most visible competing channels we find are those that stick out between the old socialist economy and the new capitalist retail economy. The grain and oil stores lining street markets are most visible
of this past/present dynamic; today they represent something akin to an ‘informal’ economy. These stores are all now privately owned and operated, but they maintain many elements of a past era where grain and oil were staples that needed to be rationed in a socialist economy. These stores operate in a free market that is largely absent of state influence, but encompassed under the umbrella of the state. These stores represent an informal economy that continues to exist on Chinese urban streets in the mornings before the roads clutter with cars, giving consumers an opportunity to purchase cheaper rice with the advertisements that they find in supermarkets.
Chapter 6

Cultures:

Key Actors in the Northeast Rice Commodity Network

I have found that Chinese taxi drivers always seem to be opinionated and have a lot to say, so they tended to be some of my favorite people to randomly talk to. In Harbin, this proved to be true as I was talking to a taxi driver about my project one day. What I learned after having spent nearly a year in Harbin, I had also learned that taxi drivers are knowledgeable about other areas of Heilongjiang because they tend to come from the outskirts of the city. This taxi driver reported to me that grain choice is a very interesting part of China today because of its significance in recent history. In the past, he asserted, most urban people preferred to eat rice. Living in urban areas, it was easier to access different types of grain so in the early reform period, he told me, all urban residents believed that rice was the best grain. “If you were a rural farmer, it was hard to access rice, but urban residents could get lots of rice. So urban people wanted to get rice just because they could.”

Now, however, he believes it is a different story. In urban areas, the new trend is to be health-conscious. As a result, urban residents, especially women, do not want to eat rice. They believe eating too much rice will make them fat. In their quest to be healthy, urban residents are moving away from eating xiliang (rice and wheat) and turning
towards *culiang* (corn, millet, sorghum). Today, most rural people want to eat *xiliang* because in the past they had to eat too much *culiang*. *Xiliang* is much more available today and it tastes better now. People’s lifestyles are much better now so they want to eat what they can afford. However, *culiang* is much better for you and its better for your health because it’s easier to digest. Only people in urban areas know this today because they are much more health conscious, whereas people in rural areas like what tastes better and what they have access to.

This particular conversation with the taxi driver compounded various conversations and tidbits I had collected from various informants throughout my research. Ideas of personal choice regarding grain consumption often merged with ideas of national and regional grain consumption. Below I list just a few examples from conversations I had during the fieldwork I conducted:

We don’t eat much rice here. If you study rice, you should go to southern China where the majority of people eat rice as their main grain. Here we eat wheat flour products.

--a 51 year old male consumer in a Harbin supermarket

We have the best rice in China here in the northeast. Wuchang rice is the very best and it is so close to Harbin. So we are close to the best rice in China so we like to eat this rice.

--a 38 year old female consumer in a Harbin supermarket

I only make rice for my family. If I am served wheat, I eat it, but when I shop and cook for myself and my family, I buy rice from the northeast. Rice makes me feel full, wheat makes my stomach feel uncomfortable.

--a 63 year old Harbin retired male cook

---

27 In simple terms *xiliang* 粗粮 refers to fine grains that have been polished, and refers to rice and wheat only, while *culiang* 粗粮 means course grain and refers to everything from millet, sorghum, corn, potatoes, and even brown rice.

28 Some of these conversations occurred in everyday discussion and were not part of formal interviews. Translation and interpretation were made by the author.
The south of China eats wheat while we here in the north prefer to eat rice. We get the best rice from the northeast.
--a 40 year old female Beijing grain and oil store owner

Because so many people who live in Harbin are from other areas of the country, grain choice is not very important. People choose their grains mainly based on convenience, not on tradition. It does no matter where we are from originally, we eat what we want.
--a 30 year old male Harbin taxi driver

My family is from Shandong and my husband’s family is also from Shandong. His family prefers to eat wheat; my family will eat rice or wheat. We have lived in Harbin long enough so it does not matter what we eat at home, but when we are with his family, we always eat wheat.
--a 38 year old working mother in Harbin

I went for five years without eating any rice because I was afraid it would make me fat.
--a 27 year old female Harbin teacher

Our restaurant serves only grains that were eaten during the Mao era, such as corn, potatoes, squash, and millet. Rice and wheat were luxuries at the time and difficult to come by in the northeast, so people had to eat what was available. We have tried to recreate that here at this restaurant.
--a 37 year old restaurant manager in Harbin
(themed for the Mao era)

The quotes above display the differences that I found when individuals told me about their own private eating habits and those of Chinese people in general. These differences between individual practice and national narrative are highlighted in the story of choosing to consume rice. As the national narrative has it, the south of China is where the majority of rice is grown while the north has the most wheat. The northeast of China, until recently, has not been known as a rice-producing region, even though now many from the northeast only claim to eat northeast rice. Going into this research, I assumed that this so-called rice-wheat line was a misconception that Westerners had about China. Having lived in southwest China previously and traveled throughout most of the country,
I was well aware that one could eat rice or wheat in most parts of the country. I assumed that Chinese people were aware of this as well and did not hold that same narrative. However, throughout the course of my research, I realized that Chinese have the same over-generalized ideas about themselves that Westerners have. Chinese people often told me that they knew Americans liked to eat bread, beef, and milk. To them, that is entirely what our diet consists of. In my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in China, I tried desperately to break down misconceptions and generalizations that Chinese have about America. However, over the years of living in China, I realized that Chinese hold similar over-generalizations about Chinese society. Moreover, as the various above quotes highlight, many people have different national narratives about practices in China.

The story of the consumption of Chinese rice is continuously altered by different portrayals, ideas, and practices of individual bodies as they exist in everyday life. In addition to these everyday practices, individuals hold strong national narratives where and how rice is produced and consumed. The tensions between individual practices and national narratives are the focus of this chapter. I examine the ways that individual bodies connect themselves to the northeast rice. The stories that emerge below will show that despite national narrative and discourses about how Chinese consume meals and what they eat, their individual actions vary. For example, some people choose to consume rice for convenience; others choose to consume it for health and the way it makes them feel (physically) when they eat it. Some consumers I surveyed are very particular about the rice they buy, while others assume that all northeast rice is good. There are a lot of explanations for decisions that producers and consumers make regarding rice. Perhaps the easiest explanation for the reasons that answers vary
dramatically is that rice is a habit and a practice of everyday life. This understanding brings me into conversation with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus.’ According to Bourdieu, habitus refers to the everyday unconscious disposition that people develop and internalize throughout their lives (1977). These behaviors can emerge in a variety of bodily practices such as speech patterns, dress, diet, posture, etc. In many cases, the habitus reflects the social environment and class distinctions within which a person was raised (1984).

When I interrogated people about their dietary and eating habits, many had to think about answers. To them, purchasing and consuming rice is just something that Chinese people do. My intention in this chapter is not to attempt to explain, discern, and make a pattern about practices surrounding Chinese rice production and consumption. Rather, I seek to demonstrate how everyday practices in Chinese society revolve around rice in both meaningful and mundane ways. In this chapter I argue that the choices individuals make surrounding rice are shaped by a variety of political, social, and market forces. These broader forces are a function of China’s transitioning economy and society, such as the transition to a capitalist retail market economy and the discourse of suzhi encouraging individuals to invest in themselves to make themselves better quality people.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of how I conceive the concept of ‘culture.’ I then move to discuss the ways that supermarkets represent quality in China. Supermarket survey results indicate what consumers find as ‘quality’ rice in supermarkets. The third section of this chapter attempts to use specific examples from homes and restaurants to show how rice consumption is an everyday practice in northeast China. I then move on
to discuss the different ways that rice consumption and production are political. My final section discusses ways that quality is performed in both production and consumption and in everyday life.

Performing Quality

Louisa Schein, discussing the Miao minority of southwest China, makes the claim that the modern is powerfully constituted and negotiated through performance (Schein 1999). In urban China where consumption is a sign of the new modern society and forms of production are hidden (Pun 2004), we can think of the acts of consumption by individuals as performances. With the visibility of various class or status symbols comes the attempt to distinguish oneself from others. Bourdieu emphasizes how social classes seek to preserve their privileges through consumption, social mobility, and education. For Bourdieu different forms of cultural capital, accumulated primarily through the consumption of symbolic goods, marks the difference and distinction between classes (1984). The new modern society in China is one where consumption is linked with modernity and production is hidden from the modern urban landscape. To be a consumer is to be modern whereas to be involved in the lines of production is now linked with having a low suzhi. We can see the acts of consumption as a way to achieve modernity; in China this is evident in the desire to achieve a high suzhi. The consumption of japonica rice is a performance where individuals seek to embody suzhi.

The pervasiveness of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity has extended from gender as an embodied performance to the ways in which the body is disciplined through cultural conventions. The body, for Butler, is “not merely matter but a continual and
incessant *materializing* of possibilities” (1988: 521 emphasis in original). Building on Foucault (1978) who offers that bodies are an inscribed surface of events, Butler understands bodies as acting and performing as a result of larger disciplinary forces from within the technologies and structures within society (1990). Through Butler, draw a connection between the desires of urban supermarket consumers and the state to produce modern quality subjects converges in the performance of the consumption of high quality northeast rice. The act of rice consumption is a corporeal act through which subjects can aspire to materialize quality within their bodies.

George Yudice argues that performance is the site where culture and forces of governmentality converge. Performance is a place where individual bodies can react to and enact decisions which are inherently political and cultural (Yudice 2003). The case of northeast rice consumption in China presents a site where individual consumers are given the opportunity to purchase and consume varieties of ‘high quality’ rice. With the growth of large supermarkets in urban areas, consumers are likely to go to these supermarkets for grocery shopping because they are more clean and modern. Although taste preference certainly differs among consumers, the advertising and displays of ‘high quality’ rice may influence consumer decision-making. The decisions consumers make are certainly influenced by a variety of factors including the state discourse of quality, price and product advertising signs, and the awareness of consumption practices around them. In the recent past, urban residents had grain ration coupons they used to obtain rice for the household. Today, consumers are faced with a variety of decisions. Recognizing the complicated and intricate role that the state has played in affecting where the consumers shop and, more discursively, what they buy is an important link to the network
of rice. The acts which consumers choose to perform surrounding the rice they purchase are key to understanding the ways in which state discursive practices have influenced urban ‘quality’ consumers. Thus, as Yudice notes, the act of consuming is shaped by social surroundings as well as by state discursive techniques designed to transform China into a modern society. The performances of quality materialize in a variety of ways. Below, I characterize the following three: visual displays in supermarkets, a consumer commitment to quality rice, and the ‘health and wealth’ of grain consumption.

*Visual Displays in Supermarkets*

Rice possesses a visual space in urban supermarkets. Rice is placed between the section selling fresh produce and the aisles of packaged sauces and oils. Signs advertising rice prices hang overhead, and colorful bags marketing the product found within constitute the display. The display reiterates that consumers have a choice of what varieties of rice to purchase at what prices and what tactics marketers use to sell their particular rice to consumers. The visual display of rice in supermarkets serves as a reminder that rice consumption in China is no longer a process dictated and rationed through a state-planned economy. As Gillian Rose reminds us, ‘visual culture’ refers to the plethora of ways in which the visual is part of social life.” (Rose 2007: 4). The visual culture found in Harbin and Beijing supermarkets is one where the consumers are given choices and empowered with the decision of what to purchase.

With this in mind, I consider the ways in which rice is packaged, marketed and sold today as compared to the past or even the rural areas of China today. Consumers have a variety of choices of rice to purchase. Each bag displays a different brand name
and advertisement technique, competing for the consumer’s attention. In contrast to this colorful, picturesque urban supermarket scene, rice is sold in open bins and priced by the jin in grain and oil stands in street markets. Different prices represent the age and quality of the rice in terms of the variety of rice grown and the number of broken grains.

Although a contrast exists between the experiences of urban supermarket shoppers and rural street markets, supermarkets continue to offer consumers the opportunity to purchase rice by the jin.

One time I was in a Beijing supermarket and I saw a consumer carefully picking up different bags of rice. I was standing near her, watching as she picked up different bags. As I sometimes did when I was observing in a supermarket but not doing any surveys, I approached her and asked what she was looking for. Acting as a foreigner overwhelmed with the selection of rice in China, I occasionally asked other consumers for ‘advice’ about what kind of rice to purchase. She told me she was reading to get better information about the rice. She did not have one particular brand that she often bought, so she was carefully reading the descriptions on the bags to see what brand of rice enticed her. ‘Of course,’ she told me ‘dongbei rice was the best. Thai rice is also good, as she pointed to a bag, but look how expensive it is! nearly 4 times as expensive as dongbei rice,’ she pointed out.

Commitment to Quality

Earlier in this dissertation, I mention how northeast rice unquestionably is understood to be quality. Because it has the reputation of being high quality, it is without doubt the rice of choice. Even if consumers do not eat much rice, they seemed to
be committed to the idea of having quality rice. One of my survey participants (a middle-aged woman) finished the survey and asked me what kind of rice I prefer to eat. I answered, ‘dongbei, of course.’ She laughed and confessed that she did not eat a lot of rice herself. She doesn’t like to eat a lot of rice for fear of getting fat, but she pointed to a bag on a shelf nearby that was a popular brand of dongbei rice. She said she always has this rice available in her home that she uses on the occasion when she has guests over. She even told me she liked to show it to her guests so they could see that this was a popular, quality dongbei rice. In another case, a man I surveyed claimed he and his family were from Hebei where most people eat wheat. His family eats mainly wheat, but he informed me that they are proud to live in the dongbei where the can access high quality rice anytime they want.

Among consumers who often consume rice, there are ‘connoisseurs’ who know the different brand names and are happy to tell me what kind of rice they prefer and why. For example, one of my survey participants was a middle-aged woman. When I first asked her if she was willing to participate in my survey, she asked me which company I worked for. I explained that I was an American graduate student doing research on Chinese rice and I wanted to understand what kind of rice Chinese people like. ‘Oh!’ she exclaimed. ‘Americans don’t like to eat much rice so you want to understand why we like it,’ she said. ‘Well,’ I explained, ‘I really want to understand what quality rice is.’ ‘Ok.’ she understood. ‘Well, have you been to Beidaihua?’ (a popular brand name and company that operates in the northeast) ‘What about Wuchang? The best rice here in China comes from Wuchang,’ she informed me. This, of course, was nothing new to me, and then this woman started to tell me about her family friends that live in Wuchang and
often have brought her rice from their town. This woman was one of several survey participants that had not only showed off their knowledge of rice, but also offered information that connected them in some way to the rice, so it was not just that she was another consumer in the supermarket buying Wuchang rice, but that she bought it knowing that she had a special connection to it through family friends.

**Health and Wealth of Grain Consumption**

Nutrition and fitness are part of a growing field of popular culture that has attracted many young females. Part of the knowledge of nutrition, young women told me, was that rice and wheat would make you fat. I experienced this discourse on more than a few occasions during my time in Harbin; women I observed in banquets and at restaurants would not eat the rice presented to them at the end of the meal. Other times, grains such as corn were served with a meal. Hanser (2008) describes the social distinction she finds built around a ‘structure of entitlement’ in Chinese society. These social distinction are performed and legitimated around sales counters in Harbin department stores where encounters of different social groups.

Similar sets of distinction take place in Chinese supermarkets where knowledge of quality rice is at different levels. There are some consumers, like the woman I described above, who are aware of different brand and place names associated with northeast rice. I also seemed to get the sense, when I surveyed some participants, that they were thinking about each answer before giving it to me because they wanted to think about the ‘correct’ answer and not really what they thought or preferred. Hanser’s structure of entitlement refers to the “often-unconscious cultural and social sensibilities
that make certain groups of people feel entitled to greater social goods” (2008: 3). When people were eager to tell me what they knew about certain brand names or places of production, I felt they were showing off their cultural capital by telling me, the foreigner, about China’s northeast rice. More interesting, I found was the ways that they believed nutrition advice they found in popular culture and were not ashamed to admit to people they were dining with that they would not eat something because they were afraid of becoming fat.

The discourse of *suzhi* has permeated Chinese society over the past couple decades. Today, individuals are performing in spectacles of consumption—whether they be supermarkets or restaurants—the ways that they choose to invest in the quality of their bodies. For some of the people I surveyed, that investment comes in their commitment to purchasing and serving high quality rice. To others, especially young women, that investment comes in the form of closely following nutritional guidelines, which warn that consuming too much grain or starch will make them fat. By participating in such activities, these individuals are displaying cultural capital.

**The Politics of Rice**

**Rice Consumption in Everyday Life**

Clearly, broader structures in urban China have influenced the ways that food is distributed and purchased (Leppman 2005; Wu and Chee-bang 2001). Along with the increase in food choices and increased household incomes has come a change in diets. More meat and dairy is consumed on a daily basis than twenty or thirty years ago. Fresh fruit and vegetable selection and availability increased as well as better selections of
grain and oil. However, rice and other grains continue to play an important role in the ways meals are prepared, presented, and consumed both in the confines of a home as well as in public areas such as restaurants. Despite these changes, rice consumption is clearly declining in China (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). As rice consumption declines, meat and vegetables—foods with higher nutritional values—increase. There is a clear move towards eating better nutritional foods in China. Along this trend, as I argue throughout the dissertation, higher quality rice production is replacing mass grain production.

**Figure 3.2 Percentage of Food Products in Diet (1990-2007)**

*Source: FAO*
Despite trends indicating a move away from rice, it remains the major food staple of China. Wheat products such as noodles, dumplings, and steamed buns are also a significant part of the Chinese diet, but, to most people, rice is the main staple food. This is especially the case in Chinese banquets when rice is served at the end of the meal after the tasteful, expensive meats and vegetables have been consumed (Chang 1977;
Anderson 1988). Rice, served at the end of a meal, brings the meal to a close. This tradition has developed over the past few decades as Chinese diet have improved. Whereas rice used to be served with a bit of vegetables or meat to give it taste, in special situations such as banquets where people tend to overindulge, rice is the very last thing to be served (Farquhar 2002). With this practice, the host of the banquet hopes to fill his guests with more luxury foods that staple grains. The importance of rice in Chinese life is not simply limited to fancy banquets, but is a real part of everyday life at home for Chinese families. Working middle class families who cook at home prefer to make rice as opposed to other grain staples when they came home because it was very fast and convenient. A rice cooker is a necessary appliance in most families’ homes, and all the cook has to do is measure the rice and water, hit the switch, and wait 20-30 minutes. At this time, they cook meat and vegetables.

It is not simply the traditions and symbols that make up a culture, but rather the ways that people re-appropriate these items that is worthy of examination. Speaking on behalf of all Chinese, people tell me that rice is the most important grain. However, when I talk to people on a more intimate level about their own personal eating habits, I often hear different things than just rice as a staple food. They often interlace their own consumption practices with stories they have heard on the news or read in books about nutritional advice. These practices will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter 6, but what is important to note here is that there is a national narrative that is told. However, while their own individual practices may relate to this narrative to some degree, they do differ. In their study of ‘life cultivation’ practices in Beijing, Farquhar and Zhang argue that “modern situations in which the history and development of the nation-state forms
part of the daily consciousness of the people, questions of state sovereignty and legitimacy are not absent in daily practice” (2005: 305). Rice consumption has been a tradition spanning centuries in China. While rice remains a common dietary thread over time and space, the practice of eating it has changed. Today, the fact that rice is at the core of the Chinese diet remains a national narrative that ties Chinese people to one another, but the ways and places where it is consumed are up to the individual. Because of national narrative and the strong presence of the Chinese state in the daily lives on individuals, the act of consuming rice is a political practice where individuals remain tied to the state.

The act of eating is as much a cultural and political act as much as it is a biological act. Biologically, humans need food to live. Across space and time the act of eating food changes as different groups of people develop different habits centered around food, specifically staple grains. For Farquhar, the political—a post-socialist modern society where pleasure counts for a great deal—plays out through individuals in a certain time and place (2002). Farquhar uses the idea appetites as a bodily desire to highlight changes in post-socialist China. Farquhar explores the ethics and politics of eating through excess and deficiency that can simultaneously exist in a society, as banquets are their unapologetic overindulgence. While rice consumption is a biological and political practice, I return to the discourse of suzhi as it relates to consumption practices. In doing so, I highlight the ways that quality people and consumption of quality goods are a form of biopolitics. Although much of the literature on suzhi concerns the ways in which the state discourse manifests in subjects to consume, little work has linked this concept to the consumption of China’s major staple crop—rice. The
consumption of food an integral way in which consumers may seek to embody ‘quality.’

In China today, class struggle has given way to individual desire to achieve social status through consuming and behaving like a ‘quality’ citizen.

As Judith Farquhar makes clear (2002), food and eating are political acts in China. Many business and other meetings occur around a table where food and drink are shared, allowing the conversations to flow in and out of business talk when food is the medium. More than simply acting as a means around which business communication to occur, food choices individuals make are decisions driven by much more than a biological or nutritional desire for food. Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has begun to promote nutrition standards and has initiated several public health-related projects due to the rise in non-communicable diseases. These standards also warn Chinese consumers that the consumption of too much fine grain will make them fat (Chinese Nutrition Society 2010). Recent work in the study of agro-food systems focuses on food biopolitics (Bobrow-Strain 2008), bringing Foucauldian theories of discourse and biopower into the realm of food consumption by examining the discourses influencing and affecting bodily food consumption practices. At the scale of the body that we can observe and experience the interactions and contradictions through which rational economic and practical cultural decisions are made (Guthman and DuPuis 2006). Within the Chinese context of food security, the state guides both grain and bodies to increase levels and numbers of quality people and quality grain. The state, in its everlasting push to deregulate and privatize, is setting the standards and governing from a distance.
Through the discourse of quality, Chinese state and society create technologies that govern grain and bodies alike. These technologies of quality ultimately guide bodies and grain through Chinese society and economy as the state’s food security goals shift from simply feeding the population (chidebao) to feeding them well (chidehao). The PRC’s system of governance has undergone dramatic shifts from the Mao to the post-Mao era. Indeed, governance under Mao considered subjects easy to predict and anticipate. This unquestionable ‘knowledge’ of subject behavior resulted in the implementation of direct and coercive interventions (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009). The introduction of the reform era saw the introduction of market mechanisms in Chinese governance techniques. The spectacular population planning and introduction of technocratic reasoning in the 1980s facilitated the transition away from the Maoist socialist governmentality.

Many food choices in contemporary China, especially those surrounding grain, are driven by a larger set of social desires and pressures. As I demonstrate below, choices surrounding when, where, and how to consume rice are formed and shaped by broader political pressures individuals feel whether they have to do with gender, class or ethnicity. These choices represent a broader shift in Chinese grain trends as moving from quantity to quality. They are broadly separated into the following categories: scientific perspectives, social status, trust, gender, and ethnicity.

*Science vs. common views of rice quality*

When I first began this project and people I had just met asked me what I was researching, I answered *Zhongguo shuidao* or Chinese rice paddies. This answer implies
a scientific approach to Chinese rice production. Working with Chinese rice breeders and studying Chinese with them, I was told this was the best answer to give. However, when I would tell people I met in other situations (not in the university setting) that I studied rice paddies, they assumed I meant strictly from the scientific production point and they did not have much to contribute. Later, I realized that not many people were going to add their opinions to what I had told them because they see rice paddies as something that experts know about; everyday people on the street do not feel they know much about rice production. So after a few months, I finally changed my answer completely to Zhongguo chide wenhua or Chinese eating culture. Chinese eating culture was something that many people wanted to share with me. I had plenty of people I had just met eager to talk to me about their own views of Chinese eating culture. Thus it was easier for me to discuss some aspects of my research with people I had just met who were not involved in the production process of rice.

During my research, I found many instances where a divide existed between the scientific approach to studying ‘rice paddies’ and Chinese eating culture. One day during my Chinese tutorial, I asked my tutor, a Chinese rice breeding scientist, if he preferred to eat rice and what kind he ate at home. He told me that he does like to eat rice, but because he knows so much about it and studies it all day, he can only eat the ‘best’ rice. “When I eat wheat, I can eat anything because I don’t know it that well, but rice, I have to eat good rice.” He said that the best rice he prefers is rice that his research team grows in Heilongjiang because it is ‘pure.’ “We have trained the farmers well; we give them the seeds. They grow this rice, and they only use the best fields with the best soil and pure water.” To this scientist, the best rice resulted in a combination of good seeds and the
right growing conditions. His knowledge of the production process allowed him to be a
good judge of whether or not the rice was considered quality. In another conversation,
my tutor informed me that his family and friends often ask him to describe the rice they
are eating. When they sit down together at a meal, his family and friends have high
expectations for his ability to taste-test the rice and talk about how good its quality is. He
contrasted this experience to eating wheat, which he claims is *suibian* or following
convenience; he does not know much about the process of wheat production, so he does
not know what is good quality wheat. In other words, he can eat it without thinking too
much about the quality.

In contrast to the scientists with whom I worked who were focused on the
amalyose content of the rice grains as quality, most of the consumers I surveyed reported
that taste was very important. To them, taste consisted of whether or not the rice had a
fragrance (*xiang*) to them. However, scientists and consumers unfamiliar with the rice
production process would all agree that most varieties grown in the northeast of China
were high quality, whether it was for their starch content or their taste. In China where
scientists and engineers generally tend to lead society (or are at least perceived by the
general population to be in a high social position), their opinion matters. As my Chinese
tutor reported, his family and friends wanted to know his opinion of the rice quality he
was consuming. His opinion was important to them.

One day I was talking to a Chinese friend of mine (an engineering graduate
student) who asked me about my research. She assumed that I was familiar with rice
breeding techniques and scientific ideas of quality as she asked me to explain the
difference between Wuchang rice and the rice that was grown close to her hometown
further north in Heilongjiang. It was still near the beginning of my research and I responded that I did not know, that that question was one of my research questions. She told me that when she was in Harbin and ate Wuchang rice, she could not taste a difference with the rice in her hometown, but she knew that Wuchang was supposed to be good. On the one hand, she was looking for a scientific explanation for why Wuchang was greater quality, but on the other hand, she expressed a little skepticism that perhaps it was just the name Wuchang that made it so famous.

Status

One of my friends in Harbin exemplifies the story that this taxi driver told me. She is a 27-year-old English teacher at a university in Harbin. She has spent a year teaching Chinese in the US, and is a well-rounded and open-minded person. She confided in me that until very recently, she had not eaten rice for about 5 years. She knows that rice is supposed to make you fat, so from the time she was a college student of about twenty through the year she spent in the US, she did not eat rice. Instead, she preferred to eat small amounts of vegetables and meat. She never ate bread or noodles, either. She would eat oatmeal or other forms of what she considers culiang in the morning with salads, fruit, and vegetable and meat dishes in the afternoon and evening. When she returned to China and moved back in with her parents, however, they put pressure on her to eat xiliang. She eats rice and wheat today, but only in small amounts and usually only when she is out to eat with her parents and other family members.

During my conversation with the taxi driver, I asked him about the relationship between suzhi and grain consumption. He answered that many rural and urban people try
to raise their suzhi, but they have different ideas about what constitutes high suzhi. For rural people, its having access to xiliang, something they have waited for in the countryside. Urban people, he believes, are much more concerned with their health and bodies. So for them to have or maintain ‘high suzhi,’ they are interested in the ways that food they consume affects their body. I later asked my friend about the relationship between eating high quality rice and suzhi.

That is interesting. I never considered that before, but I think the main issue has much more to do with information about health than it does with raising one’s suzhi. People here are definitely concerned about appearing as if they have suzhi, but that has more to do with being health-conscious than about eating certain brands. For example, to be health-conscious is to eat well…eating well is not eating a lot of rice and bread or cake or drinking alcohol and we know that in the cities. In rural areas, they might not know what is good for their health. But in China we are concerned about suzhi in two ways. One of these ways is how we buy things. I noticed in America many young people are concerned about protecting and saving their money, but in China many its about who can consume more. The other way is how we take care of our bodies, you know nutrition and fitness. Maybe rice fits into the second one more than the first…

I followed this conversation up with this friend and some other friends in Harbin. When I asked about the relationship between purchasing high quality rice and suzhi, responses came more in terms of health than they did about the status that comes along with actually purchasing or consuming high quality northeast rice.

Trust

As I mentioned earlier, consumer trust allows people to choose where they get their rice. Going into this research, I was mostly concerned about rice that was being sold in supermarkets, where fancy displays were set up to attract and entice consumers into buying a certain brand name of rice. I felt this way because so much of the story of
rice consumption that people had told me involved supermarkets and what I saw as the capitalist retail track of rice. They had told me about the new companies that were involved in the rice business, the clean supermarkets, and the new ‘brands’ of rice that were emerging, including high quality northeast rice and imported Thai rice. I assumed that these supermarkets were where everyone would want to purchase their rice. Despite the appearance of shiny, clean supermarkets, the majority of people I surveyed reported that they preferred to buy rice in grain and oil stores. One woman I spoke with in a grain and oil store reported it was a matter of costs vs. benefits:

The rice in the supermarkets is good, I think. It is more expensive than most of the rice available in grain and oil stores. But how do I know that it is real? In China, we have a lot of fake products. I know that the rice I get at the grain and oil store is good…why? Because I know the owner, he is a good man…and I can touch and smell the rice before I buy it. In supermarkets, you only buy it in packages or you only have one selection of cheap rice in the bins. I don’t think that rice is as good.

One friend told me that Wuchang rice is the best and most famous, but it is difficult to buy in Harbin unless you know someone from there [Wuchang] who will give it to you. When I asked him about the Wuchang rice that is available to purchase all over Harbin, he responded with doubt that it was real Wuchang rice.

Chinese consumers, following years of shopping at underground markets where salespeople notoriously try to cheat them, are distrustful, skeptical of salespeople, and anxious about their purchasing decisions. Hanser (2008) describes in detail the practices that consumers go through when examining and ultimately deciding whether or not to purchase a coat. “Two of the most common practices were the close inspection of merchandise and a practice called tiao in Chinese, a term that literally means ‘to choose’ and in practice refers to selecting the best from a number of ostensibly identical items”
(168-169). Aware of food safety and quality issues, I found many Chinese consumers engaging in such practices in supermarkets and grain and oil stores as they selected their rice. However, just as Hanser reports that coat customers wanted a ‘new’ coat that had not even been tried on, rice consumers reported that they did not buy the rice from the bin because it had been touched and smelled and was not clean (2008).

Gendered Politics

Of the people that I interviewed or surveyed during my research, I found women most eager to talk to me, especially the women who were involved in informal sectors of the economy or who were even consumers, cookers, and homemakers and interacted with rice more so than men. Before I began talking to consumers, I had already felt and experienced the gendered aspects of the rice chain. I felt my position as a woman social scientist most strongly when I was working with the rice breeding scientists at NEAU, most all of whom were male with the exception of a few master’s students. In fact, the majority of interviews that I conducted with scientists, officials, and leaders on the production end of rice were men, while the majority of women I spoke to in rural households or in grain and oil stores were women. As a scientific field, agriculture in China is definitely male-dominated. However, I found the burden of informal work to remain in the hands of women.

In urban areas, cooking responsibilities may be shifting towards the men. As one friend in Harbin believed, women and young people are too busy to cook, they don’t
want to learn how to cook, so they often go to restaurants. You know, she told me, women want a higher social status, so they want a husband that can cook. To be a woman and cook is not considered to have a high social status, so they need to look some someone, even a husband who will cook. Although there are a number of males in China who love to cook, claim to be good at cooking, and accept that household responsibility, most of the young men I spoke with were hesitant to learn how to cook on their own, but if they had a girlfriend who wanted them to learn, they would. One male graduate student friend related this to the disproportion of males to females. ‘We have to do whatever they want us to do because it is much easier for women to find a new boyfriend than a man to find a new girlfriend.’

In rural areas, just as women were the ones who tended to the home gardens in the backyards, they also shared the majority of cooking responsibilities in the home. Although I spoke with quite a few women who worked in the rice fields, they tended to attribute that their husbands did much of the work in the fields while they tended to the gardening and cooking responsibilities at home. For many of these same women, however, their husbands had other jobs outside of the village doing hard labor or growing rice in other villages, as the women tended to stay closer to home.

**Ethnicity**

As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, the Chinese Koreans are often attributed with assisting with the emergence of high quality northeast rice. In addition to their work in producing northeast rice, Koreans also asserted their identity through consuming rice. As one twenty-six year old male living in a Korean village told me:
I am Korean. My entire family is Korean; we have only lived in China for eighty years, the rest of our family is in Korea. Rice is a large part of Korean culture. We grow it here in the fields and we eat it every day for lunch and dinner. Did you taste this rice? It is good. We have the best rice in China.

The Koreans I spoke with in Minle and the other villages I visited were quite proud of the rice they produced and consumed. They seemed to understand that the northeast rice that has become so famous around China is a result of their own ancestors’ efforts to grow rice in the northeast. They also saw it almost as a duty to stay at home and continue the tradition, “Our children have great opportunity these days to go work in the cities. They often work for Korean companies in large cities in other areas of China….now it is our job to do rice production.”

**Quality in Supermarkets**

As discussed previously in this dissertation, supermarkets are growing in popularity in China as a place of convenience where food, household products, and clothing are all available. These supermarkets have also earned a reputation for offering clean, hygienic products unlike those available at street markets or in smaller stores. As Chapter 5 suggests, Chinese society and economy are moving toward a retail market economy environment where supermarkets are the emblems of this system. This section discusses the supermarket surveys that I conducted in Harbin, Beijing, and Ahcheng, a smaller city just outside of Harbin. The purpose of these surveys was to help discern and understand consumer behavior surrounding rice purchasing decisions and the way that rice gets qualified in those decisions. The goals of the surveys were not only to
understand what consumers think of as characteristics of quality, but also to know where and how they prefer to buy rice.

Supermarket Surveys

Just as responses regarding China’s primary grain vary dramatically among different people, so do the responses regarding what makes quality rice. As the quotes above demonstrate, I realized that many people would tell me different things either as their opinion or tell me them as fact. The solution to this problem was to quantify the importance of different characteristics of rice that consumers relate to quality. I conducted over 600 surveys in Harbin and Beijing supermarkets. I also conducted 88 surveys in Ahcheng, a small town an hour outside of Harbin city. I chose these three cities because I wanted to include China’s capital city, the capital of the province where I conducted my research, plus a smaller city in the northeast. I completed a total of 624 surveys altogether, 434 in Harbin and 102 in Beijing and 88 in Ahcheng.

Prior to conducting my surveys, I spent a lot of time in two of Harbin’s main Carrefour supermarkets to observe consumers selecting rice and to ask some initial interview questions. I designed the surveys with two major goals in mind. First, I wanted to understand what their preferences towards quality were. Prior to writing the surveys, I spent hours in supermarkets observing consumers who would touch, feel, and smell the rice in the open bins in the supermarket as they were contemplating purchasing it. I asked them what they were looking for when they did this. I also asked consumers who were looking at brand names and packages of rice down the same aisle what qualities they looked for when they purchased rice. As a result, I came up with the
following seven categories that most people initially associated with quality: appearance, taste, nutrition, price, green (whether or not the rice was certified as ‘Green Food’ rice), place of production, and brand.

Figure 7.1 Consumer Rice Preferences, all survey participants

![Consumer Preferences](image)

Figure 7.2 Harbin Consumer Rice Preferences

---

I had originally planned to ask each person to evaluate each of the characteristics on a scale of 1-5, with one being the least important and 5 being the most. However, as I had a professor and graduate students look at the survey draft, they insisted that the shorter and simpler the survey was, the more participants I would get. This counteracted with my initial goals of getting a smaller sample size with more extensive answers. I soon changed my mind when some research assistants and I tested these surveys. They convinced me that short and simple was the way to go. I recognized that the numbers of these surveys would help me quantify what people look for, whereas I could follow up the survey data by asking more extensive questions. When people are shopping at a supermarket, they did not want to be bothered by a 10-minute survey and would more likely answer questions with a 2-minute survey. So we ended up asking them to rate the 7 characteristics on a scale of 1 (bu zhongyao) not important, 2 (zhongyao) important, or 3 (hen zhongyao) very important.

In hindsight, one important question I should have asked regarding their rice purchasing preferences was how they have changed over time. For example, ten years ago, where did they purchase rice and what characteristics of rice were important to them? In future studies, I will keep this in mind.
Figure 7.3 Beijing Consumer Rice Preferences

Figure 7.4 Ahcheng Consumer Rice Preferences
Second, I wanted to understand what their general rice-purchasing behaviors were. In addition to asking consumers to rate the qualities of rice they found important, the surveys asked consumers a couple basic questions about where they buy rice (supermarket, grain and oil store, from family members in the countryside, etc.) and how they buy rice (packaged or in bulk from the bins). I also asked them to define quality rice in their own words; this yielded mixed results as many did not know how to respond. I also wrote notes and instructed my research assistants to take notes when people had something new or different to say.
Figure 7.5 Where Consumers Purchase Rice

Where Consumers Purchase Rice

![Bar chart showing the distribution of rice purchases by location and type.](image)

- Supermarkets
- Grain and Oil
- Other

Figure 7.6 How Consumers Purchase Rice

How Consumers Purchase Rice

![Bar chart showing the distribution of rice purchase methods by location and type.](image)

- Package
- Bin
- No preference
Survey Analysis

Given that the surveys were designed with the idea in mind that all of these characteristics were important in the first place, it makes sense that most people responded that they were very important factors. Instead of reading these survey results to see what is most important, I believe the interesting results are the categories that got the most ‘not important’ responses.

1). Appearance 外观

Many of the people who stopped to look at the rice in the open bins in the supermarket would take time to pick the rice up in the hands, sort through it and look at it carefully. They reported that they were looking to make sure that most of the rice was a translucent, almost clear color. When grains are broken, the end they are broken is white. The appearance of white pieces of grain means that the rice was either harvested too early or was handled roughly during the processing and many of the pieces broke.

Just over half of all participants answered that appearance was very important to them when purchasing rice. Because so many consumers stop at the bins to touch and closely examine the open bins of rice, I thought this number would be higher. But, for many of the consumers who prefer to buy rice in packages or bags, they do not have the opportunity to closely examine the rice for sale.

2). Taste 食味 or 味道 or 口味

After completing surveys, I often asked participants what they believed to be the single most important factor or I asked them to describe what quality rice meant to them.
They often said fragrance (xiang) was important and represented quality to them. As I have discussed in previous chapters, one of the factors that distinguishes northeast rice from other rice is that it has a slight fragrance to it, similar to Thai jasmine or Indian Basmati rice. I did not include fragrance as a separate category because I felt it fit most appropriately in the taste category.

As it turned out, taste was a major factor many people identified as important. Of the 624 surveys administered, 582 reported that the taste of the rice was ‘very’ important with only 19 and 23 respectively reporting that it was ‘not important’ or just ‘important.’ Many attributed the unique fragrance of northeast rice to their decision to want to buy northeast rice. Sometimes, while administering a survey, I would informally ask consumers what was the most important factor or what ‘quality’ meant to them. Many responded that xiang or fragrance was the most important factor and that’s what quality rice was; if it was fragrant, it was quality.

3). Nutrition 营养

This category, coupled with green, provides an example of where I believe many consumers were answering what should be important rather than what factors influenced them to purchase rice. Most rice packages have nutritional labels on them, but they are all the same. Sometimes when I asked people what they meant by nutrition, they explained it meant that the grains were ‘healthy’ and ‘green.’ Other people, usually older people, reported that all rice was healthy and nutrition was a bigger part of the Chinese diet. You cannot be healthy without fan in your diet, one older man explained to me.
Nutrition came just after taste as the second factor many people identified as being ‘very important’ with 519 responses. Interestingly, Beijing consumers did not report nutrition was nearly as important as consumers in Harbin and Ahcheng (where nearly all participants reported nutrition was very important). The one explanation I have for this is that Beijing consumers are more aware of and educated about nutrition because they are in the developed capital city. As I mentioned, many people seemed to associate nutrition with what rice should have, so my understanding is that they have ideals about what the rice they consume should consist of, whereas people in Beijing are more aware that rice in general does not contain a lot of nutrition\(^\text{30}\).

4). Price 价格

Because grain and oil stores arrange their rice selection in price order, I thought this would be a very important factor. In markets and grain and oil stores, I have seen many people come and ask, for example, for 3 jin of the 1.8 yuan rice. Additionally, as I discuss below, Chinese consumers are notorious for thinking that a seller is trying to rip them off and they try to haggle the price whenever and wherever possible.

Surprisingly, the most people surveyed responded that price was the least important factor to them. Over half of all survey respondents put price in the not important or important category. As one of my research assistants explained, the state controls rice prices so many consumers trust that the government is giving them a fair price when they buy rice.

\(^{30}\) In the conclusion, I discuss ideas of nutrition and nutrition education and awareness as a topic of future inquiry. While I can only speculate my ideas here, I feel this is a compelling area where much research can be done.
5). Green 绿色

As mentioned in earlier chapters, green food is gaining importance in China. Before I officially began my surveys many people in supermarkets told me that green food rice is the highest quality rice. By talking with Chinese consumers, I found they associated green food with the health benefits of eating pesticide-free foods; little seemed very aware of the environmental benefits associated with producing green food products.

After taste and nutrition, green food rice garnered the third highest ‘very important’ responses with 497. After responding ‘very important,’ many people would say something along the lines of, ‘of course green food is very important, its clean and good for your health.’ After reflecting on it and discussing it with a research assistant, I think green and nutrition may have yielded similar results to survey participants. Also similar to nutrition, when consumers responded that green was very important, they might have been associating it with what should be important; I rarely observed people choose rice with the green food label on the package.

6). Place 产地

Because I had had so many people tell me how important northeast or Wuchang rice was, I assumed that the place of production would be an important factor that led many people to purchase rice that was strictly from the northeast or Wuchang. Similarly in Beijing, I thought many people would report rice from the northeast as very important.

As it turned out, just over half of all respondents (370) reported that the place of production was ‘very important.’ I did have several respondents who answered that place
was ‘not important’ and then answer that brand was ‘very important’ saying Wuchang rice Wuchang is the best rice. In a newly emerging capitalist retail economy, brand names are also newly emerging concepts to consumers.

7). Brand 品牌

I found brand to be an interesting category because I think there was no set definition that all respondents had for what constituted a brand. As mentioned above, some associated Wuchang rice as being a brand name, while others asked if green food constituted a brand before answering.

This category certainly got the least number of respondents saying that brand name was ‘very important.’ As I suggest above, this could be because brand names are a newly emerging concept. Along with—and perhaps in addition to—the newness of brand names, Chinese consumers express a lack of trust in many products that they buy. This lack of trust has not been alleviated by a number of recent food scare scandals in China and could contribute to consumers not citing brand as a very important factor in their rice selection.

8). Where to buy rice

As I have stated earlier, when I began this research, I was mainly interested in the ways that supermarkets were displaying different brands of rice. I was assuming that most people bought rice in supermarkets, but I soon learned the importance that grain and oil stores held for consumers. While I had wanted this to be a study of the retail side of rice consumption/purchasing, I knew it was important to consider the alternative, which
in this case was the grain and oil stores. Although all of my surveys took place in supermarkets in or near the rice aisle, more than half of all respondents claimed to purchase their rice at grain and oil stores. Not surprisingly, Ahcheng, the small town where I chose to do surveys, had the highest percentage of respondents who claimed to purchase their rice in grain and oil stores. Beijing, home to many new refurbished indoor ‘street markets’ complete with grain and oil stores inside, also had a high number of respondents prefer to purchase rice in grain and oil stores.

9). How to buy rice

In my time in supermarkets, I observed many people drawn towards the large open bins of rice in supermarkets. They carefully looked at, touched, and smelled the rice. But then many of them claimed to buy rice in packages because the bin rice was not clean. ‘I don’t want to buy that rice! It is cheap, but look how many people feel it! Its not clean’ a survey respondent once exclaimed when I asked her if she preferred bin or bag rice. Although grain and oil stores lack the small bags of rice commonly found in supermarkets, they offer larger bags (10-20 jin or more) at more of a bulk price than the smaller bags (2.5-5 jin) commonly found in supermarkets. Respondents preferred rice purchased like this than smaller amounts.

**Everyday Practices of Rice Consumption**

Eating is commonly a social experience in China. Families gather together to eat two or three times a day. University students characterize the hardest workers as those who ‘eat alone,’ meaning that they are so busy working they do not have time to socialize
with others. During my fieldwork, I did not make it a point to seek out special places to eat or to gather with friends because of my research, but I made it a common practice to observe and take note of the eating environments in which I found myself when I was out with Chinese friends. In what follows, I describe some of these experiences. These examples are not to suggest that these practices are more common or authentic than others, but offer a description of some of the characteristics of eating at home, in a restaurant or cafeteria or in a banquet setting generally offer.

Convenience in the Urban Home

Late one afternoon in Harbin, I ring the doorbell to the home of an acquaintance. Her ten-year old daughter, Fang, whom I have never met, answers the door. The nanny greets me after the daughter lets me in. As I promised her mother, I sat down and spoke in English with her daughter for about twenty minutes until my friend, Xiaomei came home from work. She came home, apologizing for being late. As the nanny snuck out the door, Xiaomei asked me how well Fang can speak English. While neither Xiaomei nor her husband speak English well, they want Fang’s English to be perfect by the time she is 18 so that she can go to university in America. Compared to most 10-year olds I knew in China, Fang’s English was good. She attends extra English classes three nights a week and has a private tutor come to talk with her for 2 hours on the weekends.

Xiaomei called me into the kitchen, inviting me to participate in food preparation as we had planned. As it turned out, the nanny had left a pot of soup and several bowls of food covered to stay warm before she left. Knowing I study rice, Xiaomei pointed to the
rice maker, which was keeping the freshly-cooked rice warm. I asked if the nanny usually prepares the food.

Of course, I work all day, and I am tired when I get home. My husband doesn’t get home until after 9 pm most nights. We just like to be able to eat when it is convenient. We usually eat rice because it is most convenient to make and it can stay warm until my husband comes home. Sometimes I stop and get steamed bread on the way home. I don’t care what I eat, and Fang doesn’t care. My husband also does not care. We just like to have something ready for us after work all day….of course when we go to restaurants it is different. If we are hosting guests, we always ask them what they prefer to eat before ordering any grain. Because some people care very much if they eat rice or noodles. We always go to nice restaurants so we know that the grain we get will be good.

Xiaomei and her husband are quite well-off. He is a professor of mechanical engineering at Harbin Institute of Technology and she is an accountant. They live in a modest 2-story apartment with 3 bedrooms. Their nanny comes 5 days a week during the week and cleans the house, watches Fang, and has dinner waiting for them when they get home from work.

I highlight Xiaomei’s story because it emphasizes the ways that upper middle class families think of daily meals as a matter of convenience. I have met many other families, especially couples under 40 who do not cook much and do not prefer to cook when they are at home. They like to go out to eat, grab some form of take-out food one the way home from work, or have someone (either a nanny or a parent) cook in their home for their family.

_Fresh meals in the Rural Home_

For the best food, go to the countryside, several of my friends in Harbin told me. They assured me that all of the food cooked in rural homes was ‘green’ and that it was
One particular friend, originally from a rural area of Heilongjiang assured me that
most homes in the countryside grew and consumed their own food. Indeed, I found home
gardens in Minle thrived. I often asked people if I could go look at their plots. The
women were most excited to show me what they were growing, but we often had a
difficult time walking through the yard because all the empty space in the yard was filled
with vegetable plants. All of the households that I surveyed reported they grew most of
their own vegetables and used them throughout the year. One afternoon I went to lunch
in the home of a Korean family in Minle whom I had surveyed. They knew one of the
mill managers who had helped me a lot, and they were having a special lunch at their
house and invited him and me to come.

Korean farmhouses are all made with lifted floors so that a small round table with
short legs is placed in the center of the room. This afternoon we had more than enough
people to fill the table, so the room was cleared, except for the table. I was told to sit
close to the table, even though there were plenty of people who had to sit back, not near
the table. I looked around the table and realized that except for me and another woman, it
was all men around the table. The women were sitting back or helping in the kitchen.
The men passed around bowls and glasses to each of us with a coveted place at the table.
The bowls were bigger than the normal Chinese rice bowls I was used to that tended to be
on the small side. The women in the kitchen were coming out to place bowls of food on
the table. After the male head of the household began the meal with a toast, we began to
eat. I soon learned that the bowls that we got were not for the rice, but for the bones of
the meats that were served.
When the eating and drinking around the table got to be too much for me, I scooted back and began talking with a woman who was sitting behind me. She informed me she lived down the street. She had brought the fresh green beans we were eating. She told me about her home garden in her yard, and that it was one of her favorite places to work because in this garden she can put a lot of time into growing the food that she and her family and friends will eat. Sometimes she works in families’ rice fields, but that work is too difficult and she doesn’t care about it enough to put a lot of time into it. She pointed to other food that was being served on the table, noting where each of the vegetables had come from.

While the use of home vegetable gardens is certainly an interesting topic, I asked each rural household that was involved in growing rice where they got the rice that their families consumed. Because many rural homes in Minle do not have their own processing machinery, they tend to get a portion of the rice back from the companies through which they are contracted to grow rice. Just as friends in Harbin and Beijing had informed me that eating in the countryside offers the most ‘fresh’ and ‘clean’ or ‘green’ food, I found people in Minle to be proud of the food they served for much of the same reason.

*In the Cafeteria*

“We have to go to the third floor!” my roommate exclaimed as we entered the university cafeteria. It was the beginning of the summer of 2008 and it was my first time eating in the university cafeteria. Each of us Americans had been assigned a Chinese roommate for the summer, and on this day mine was showing me the cafeteria. I had
never been a fan of Chinese cafeteria food, but there were quite a few people who claimed that this university had some of the best food, so I was willing to give it a try. We took an escalator up past two other floors of a crowded cafeteria to reach the third floor. This floor was a lot less crowded and had nice wood circular tables, as opposed to the small booths on the first two floors. My roommate, grinning as she showed me the different food choices, was pleased to inform me that this floor had the best food.

We walked past six or seven different stalls, each of which offered different types of food. I walked past a stall that offered soup that resembled a Russian borsch with thick white bread next to it. Another stall offered a beef curry that looked like some curry I had once in Japan. I also saw some big, thick rice noodles that were stir-fried with chicken and vegetables, resembling a Southeast Asian dish. I was surprised to see all of these dishes because I have known quite a few Chinese people who are reluctant to try new foods. I knew this university had quite a few foreign students, especially in the summer, but most of the students I saw that day were Chinese. I then came upon a stall of what looked like Chinese stir-fry. It came served in a dish, with a separate bowl of rice.

After frequenting this cafeteria, I learned that meals on the first floor tend to cost about 3 yuan, 4 yuan on the second floor, and 5 yuan on the third floor. It was a tiered system where price, quality, and presentation converge. On the first and second floors, as I have experienced in other cafeterias, a scoop of rice is served in a bowl with the main dish of vegetables placed directly in the bowl on top of the rice. However, this third floor served rice in a more traditional, family-style manner often found in homes and in restaurants when meals are served, the rice is in an individual bowl. As I mentioned
above, this third floor cafeteria also had round tables that are more typical of traditional family-style eating. Chinese university students are not used to eating well in the university cafeteria; they usually eat in cafeterias for convenience. This particular cafeteria has earned the university the reputation for having some of the best cafeteria food in a university. It appears to me that this reputation has come in the ways that food is presented and served and the variety of food. Paying a slightly higher amount for the food on the third floor provides access to this presentation and variety.

At a Banquet

I have been to more than my fair share of banquets in China. When I first went to Sichuan, China as a Peace Corps volunteer nearly a decade ago, many discussions among Americans were focused on the question of why we always get served rice at the end of the meal? It was puzzling to us who had become accustomed to eating rice with the meal in Chinese restaurants in America. The simple explanation for this is that rice is a filler and the hosts of the banquet would like to see guests filled up on meat, vegetables, and wine before resorting to feeding the guests with the plain grain food at the end of the meal. The advice more experienced volunteers gave us at the beginning of our service was to make sure we asked our hosts—not the staff—for rice to come out with the food. The basis of this idea was that if we explained to our hosts it was our ‘habit’ to prefer to eat rice with the meal, they could request rice come out early from the banquet staff. If we asked the staff ourselves, we may make the hosts ‘lose face’ because asking for rice early in the meal would suggest that we were not satisfied with the food in front of us.
Accompanying these discussions about when the rice was served was our amazement about how much food was served. Once plates covered the center of the table and old plates were removed, plates began to be stacked on top of each other, offering guests more than twice the amount of food everyone in the room could possibly eat. Farquhar (2002) describes this banquet tradition as a symptom of post-socialism as excess is a contrast to the years of deficiency that Chinese faced in years of famine and socialism when food portions were strictly rationed. In the years since then, I have spent plenty of time along China’s more developed east coast. Interestingly I have never seen the same amounts of excess food. There seems to be an understanding that more food was wasteful. In fact, during the summer of 2007 when I was conducting my initial research for this project, I took a trip to Jilin province with a professor from China Agriculture University and some of her graduate students. Throughout the trip, they made an effort to save the leftovers from every big meal we had so as to be sure not to waste the food. One of the graduate students explained to me that as agricultural scientists, they understood the amount of food that was wasted over Chinese meals and they did not want to waste food because they know that there are plenty of poor people in China that do not eat as well.

With these previous experiences, I was anxious to see what the banquet/eating culture would be like in the northeast. Northeasterners, of course, have a reputation in China for be able to eat well. One of the first banquets I attended with my host professor and some of his graduate students showed me that Harbin banquets fit somewhere in between the excessiveness of Sichuanese banquets and the deliberate ‘no waste’ meals the Beijing scientists planned. Plenty of food was served at this banquet, with rice (or
noodles) served at the end. However, we did leave behind a good amount of food when we got up to leave two hours later. This experience was standard or typical of most of the other banquets I attended in Harbin. Although I do not want to generalize between Sichuan, Harbin, and Beijing, as the level of education and perhaps exposure to foreigners goes up, the amount of food that is wasted appears to go down.

*Giving Northeast Rice as Gift*

A common practice in China is to bring a specialty good from your hometown (or a place you have visited recently) when visiting friends and family. To tap into this market, Harbin has a chain of stores that sell specialty products from the northeast. Aside from rice, the northeast of China is known for a number of specialty products. These stores sell a variety of products grown in the northeast, most of them commodity foodstuffs such as dried wood ear mushrooms, blueberry products such as jam and juice, and specialty alcohol and tobacco. Each of the products comes in a fancy, elaborate form of packaging and used as gifts to give friends and family. Stores selling these products are found around Harbin.

Surprisingly, I found very little rice is for sale in these stores. I visited three of the stores in Harbin; one of the stores did not carry rice and the other two only had a small selection of packaged rice. The rice that they sold was packaged in colorful bags and advertised that it was from Wuchang. I asked the employees why they did not have a lot of rice and they said it was because rice is not commonly given as a gift. One of the stores confirmed this by telling me that since opening up and reform when people’s lifestyles have improved, giving grain can be an insult to a friend or family because it is
assumed that they do not have enough to eat. According to one of my friends, “my family often gives gifts to family and friends not in Harbin; we often give rice and money as a gift called songli. This is a very popular tradition, though many people do not eat the rice when they receive it. Instead, they give it to other people.” In stores where there is an option to buy ‘specialty’ rice, the rice is often packaged in a fancy box that is already wrapped and ready to be given as a gift. Giving rice in a regular, standard bag would not be a ‘gift’ as one store employee told me, but the rice that is in a nice box is usually a higher grade and the box signifies that it is a gift or specialty rice.

When I first got to Harbin, I had people tell me that they had relatives or friends who lived in or near Wuchang, where they would go to get the most recent harvest of rice. Some people that I surveyed mentioned that they did not get their rice from either a supermarket or a grain and oil store, but that they got it from ‘other.’ Of the 15 respondents in Harbin supermarkets that said they got it from other places, 12 of those said they got it directly form friends and family who lived in the countryside and had access to fresh, local rice.

Conclusion

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that the production and consumption of cultural goods involve a struggle over symbolic types of that product. It is through these struggles that people are able to define and assert themselves into a social position through hierarchical and relational differences (1984). In the 1990s, the Chinese government began to promote a consumption of cultural goods and services. This process, in turn, made culture a site for capital accumulation and rejuvenated the post-
Tiananmen state’s capacity to affect popular and other forms of culture (Wang 2001).

The production and consumption of high quality rice from the northeast of China has grown dramatically over the past 3 decades. What has seemingly emerged over the past decade has been northeast rice as a commodity that Chinese all associate with being high quality. During the reform era, rice has transformed from a necessity that required state ration coupons to a commodity available to most people.

The ways that each individual interacts with this commodity rice, however, are quite different. Access to markets, supermarkets, grain and oil stores, etc is simply the first challenge. Although I did not come across anyone in my research that did not have access to this rice, I do not want to suggest that it does not occur. Aside from economic access, however, a distinct difference in knowledge and education surrounding nutrition exists. Those living in the countryside are content to eat white rice everyday, but urbanites like to shift their diet around; many women are simply afraid of white rice and wheat for fear of making them fat, others are beginning to see whole or coarse grains as a healthier alternative.
Chapter 7

Conclusion:

Governing Bodies, Governing Grain

In the most populated country in the world, grain and bodies are heavily politicized subjects. Indeed, the issue of food security is a constant concern for Chinese officials who face a growing population and decreasing amounts of farmland. As a result, the state has limited population growth while the mass production of grain remains a standard agricultural goal. Thirty years ago the state reversed the Maoist emphasis on mass population growth by instituting the one-child policy for each household. Accompanying this new policy came an emphasis on cultivating a child who possesses the characteristics of suzhi. At first these characteristics came through eugenics and quality education, but as China’s consumer society has developed, the consumption of goods now acts as an indicator of one’s level of suzhi. With this growing consumer society has come the recognition that most high-yielding seeds produce low quality grain. State agricultural officials have created campaigns to offer breeders and farmers incentives to produce high quality grain.

Thirty years ago, the Chinese state began to endorse the discourse of suzhi as a way to encourage families to have one child. What it has turned into thirty years later is a society of grown up single children. These children, who grew up the center of their parents’ attention, have grown accustomed to making demands and receiving them. Now
that they are grown citizens contributing to the Chinese economy, their demands continue. It is no long their parents giving into their demands, but the Chinese state. Their demands do not come in the form of political rights, but rather are shaped by dreams and desires of consumer goods. Over the past couple of decades, the Chinese state has created the conditions for a thriving consumer culture. With this thriving consumer culture, there are no ideas of limits, but people who are in their early 30s and late 20s believe they are entitled to anything and everything they can access.

Rice does not fit neatly into this picture of growing and rampant consumerism in China. In fact, as I have pointed out, rice consumption is decreasing in urban areas. But what I am arguing is that through the commodity of this rice, we can see and understand the role of the state in creating the conditions for a consumer culture to thrive. In fact, what we see is the creation of Chinese citizens who see and understand their connection to the state through consumption. Also, we can understand the ways that the state is attempting to alleviate the environmental impact of this consumer culture by creating products that are environmentally friendly such as the green food label. The idea of quality rice, despite its material characteristics of being a quality grain, has been created and promoted by the Chinese state through its labels of top brands and green rice. Most Chinese people now associate northeast rice with being quality rice. At the same time, the Chinese state has created quality citizens who use the retail economy to execute their consumer rights.

This dissertation has argued that the Chinese state governs subjects and objects in a similar manner. The ways that they are governed represents a state shift towards promoting quality as a characteristic of modernization and a goal for all to work towards.
As a result, basic agricultural products such as rice are gaining symbolism as high quality commodities in a capitalist, retail economy. With my focus on high quality rice from the northeast of China, I have shown the ways that producers and consumers interact with this particular commodity in a retail-driven consumer economy. I have made the argument that cultural economy is the most appropriate framework through which to view the network of this commodity. In their efforts to raise their own personal quality, individuals are proud of the commodity of northeast rice. Framed within China’s technological drive towards modernization (in agriculture and otherwise) and China’s burgeoning consumer society, this study offers a timely investigation of the power of cultural symbols in contemporary Chinese society.

As I laid out in Chapter 2, cultural economy is an appropriate perspective through which to view my study because of the symbolic and material characteristics that high quality northeast rice holds. Consumers I surveyed projected an understanding of the superficial material qualities of high quality northeast rice, while they also had the knowledge that northeast rice was high quality, presumably from the symbolic ways that companies have marketed northeast rice. Because of these material and symbolic characteristics, the value of northeast rice is higher on the market than other varieties of rice. It is the most common rice found in most supermarkets I visited in Harbin and Beijing. Through a cultural economy perspective, I have been able to highlight the ways spaces, economies, and cultures converge through the commodity network of northeast rice.

In this conclusion, I elaborate on the following four themes that this research project has worked with: Food Security and Grain Production, State Governance through
Food Security and Grain Production in China

China government priorities have shifted from grain production of quantities to that of quality over the past decade. In 2000, after recognizing a surplus of too much low quality rice, the state began to differentiate grain prices based on quality. Although quantity is still vastly important and the state maintains the ability to step in to alter grain production if it is threatened, the state is gradually allowing the market to guide grain production. At the same time, the state is also creating the necessary structures and incentives for the production of higher quality rice. This higher quality rice demands a higher price in the market and allows companies to distinguish rice based on varieties and quality. Recognizing this shift provides insight into the retail economy and consumer culture growing throughout China.

A variety of rice in the market assimilates with broader Chinese political economic structures which create a retail economy and a consumer culture. Whether consumers choose to shop in supermarkets, street markets, or grain and oil stores, they can now find an array of rice brands and varieties. These varieties are differentiated based on price and quality. Market vendors and grain and oil stores display the quality and price hierarchy on the street for consumers to choose. Supermarkets have a more complex system of price and quality hierarchy. This system is complicated through the packages and labels on each package. Unlike in the United States where most consumers
prefer less packaging, the Chinese system of gifting makes for large, elaborate packages of rice. Although these boxes, cartons, and cylinders of rice do not make up the majority of rice purchased in supermarkets, they account for the highest end rice (in terms of both quality and price). Mid-range packages of rice include famous (or Top Brand) names, pictures, and stories about the rice to entice consumers. Low-end rice ranges from rice bought in bulk from the bins where simple descriptive words (dongbei or Wuchang) are sufficient. But Chinese consumers are not always convinced by these descriptive words; they prefer to be able to touch, feel and smell the rice before making the decision to purchase it.

The channels through which rice travels from farm to table in China are significantly different than they were fifty years ago. They have continued to evolve and are even different today than they were a decade ago. These changing market dynamics indicate the Chinese state is much more willing to cater to a society centered on a retail economy and consumer culture than its previous goals to provide for all members of society by offering sufficient grain. Now the state realizes that it no longer needs to offer sufficient amounts of grain, but also needs to offer sufficient varieties of grain to consumers can choose which varieties and prices best meet their lifestyle demands.

Despite the efforts of the Chinese state to assimilate grain production into a market and retail economy, the state continues to keep a heavy watch on grain production. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, fears of grain shortage shook China this spring as a drought hit the North China Plain and threatened grain crops in the region. The Chinese government maintains that China will be self-sufficient in grain production as long as they continue to meet ninety-five percent of their own grain production needs.
Heavy restrictions prevent grain from being exported, although small, almost insignificant amounts of northeast rice are sold to Korea and Japan each year (USDA FAS 2010).

The market for grain is increasingly privatizing and moving away from the hands of the state. Although the state maintains the ability to step in and control grain prices, it is allowing the market to take over more and more. By eliminating agricultural taxes in 2006, the state’s goal was to attempt to curb increasing income gaps between rural and urban. But in doing so, the state also eliminated farmers’ connection to the state through grain. Indeed, the rural reforms of the 1980s established the connection between state and farmers through grain (Oi 1989). By eliminating these policies, the state also broke such a connection. However, the state continues to subsidize grain production and provide technological means (such as improved seeds and machinery) to grain producers. In the northeast, however, most of the grain production has already been taken over by private (or semi-private) companies.

**State Governance Through the Market**

The Chinese government has moved from a planned to a market economy since the 1978 reforms. As the market economy further transforms into a retail economy where large chain stores offer consumers a wide selection of products, citizens’ everyday lives are changing as well. Choice and selection—of consumer goods, education, careers, etc.—now define lives where these decisions were once made for them. These changes in the market and in citizens’ everyday lives reflect broader changes in the way the Chinese state governs. Although it may appear that the state is releasing some of its
control of the population, it is instead creating new forms of governing the population from afar using the market to buy into individual desires.

Over the past century, the Chinese political system has undergone dramatic changes. Since the Communist Revolution established the People’s Republic in 1949, the political system has remained relatively stable, as compared to the earlier half of the twentieth century. However, the PRC’s system of governance has undergone dramatic shifts from the Mao to the post-Mao era. Indeed, governance under Mao considered subjects easy to predict and anticipate. This unquestionable ‘knowledge’ of subject behavior resulted in the implementation of direct and coercive interventions (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009). The introduction of the reform era saw the introduction of market mechanisms in Chinese governance techniques. The spectacular population planning and introduction of technocratic reasoning in the 1980s facilitated the transition away from the Maoist socialist governmentality.

However, it was Deng Xiaoping’s famous 1992 Southern Tour that really rethought the role of Chinese governance from socialist ideological planning to a combination of market autonomy and technoscientific-administrative regulation. In 1992, Deng announced the goal of China’s economic planning would be to create a ‘socialist market economy.’ To rethink the role of government in the context of a socialist market economy, Deng would have to facilitate the critique of the earlier, overly-planned socialist government in the 1990s. This shift in thinking about the economy as a form of governance also required the state to think about governing subjects in different ways. No longer did the state possess all knowledge about subject behavior, but they began to think about governing subjects as individuals and tapping into
their desires. In the words of Yan Hairong, the creation of the market economy sits at the heart of these changes in governance:

With the reform state predicated on Development, post-Mao governmentality is the mediation and balancing of economic growth and the specter of social disorder. Central to this mediation is the project of constructing a market economy in which the market is taken not to be not a natural formation, but is both a system and a subjectivity that has to be actively produced, facilitated, managed (Yan 2008: 135).

Although China still maintains governance strategies carried over from the socialist period, it has increasingly adopted neoliberal governmental technologies. These technologies are aimed at governing the desires of individuals (Rofel 2007) through facilitating the wants and needs of citizens who are not just subjects of the state but also consumers, property-owners, job seekers, etc (Tomba 2009).

Consumer recognition of a variety of grain choice leads to new patterns of grain consumption. Now that grain is no longer something provided to them, consumers are branching out and reaching for new grain consumption options. Rice is shifting from being a staple grain that the state expects everyone to want to a commodity, which demands different prices on the market. Just like Chinese subjects are no longer governed according to equal distribution, product hierarchies in the market are now available for consumers to pick and choose.

By tracing the commodity of northeast rice through the channels it travels from farm to table, I have seen the impacts that consumer demand and consumer desire have on all aspects of production and distribution. Whereas the state once dictated all production quotas to farmers, regardless of grain seed or variety, now consumers have much more say. Now rice breeders are developing seeds that fit in with market needs for high quality grain. The state has initiated campaigns to encourage breeders and
producers to grow high quality grain. State agencies have also created labels of ‘quality and safety,’ ‘Green Food,’ and ‘Top Brand’ to guarantee consumers purchase quality and safe food. Private rice companies create marketing and advertising strategies to entice consumers to purchase their varieties of rice. These examples all show the collaboration between state and private enterprises, consumers, producers, and breeders to produce and consume high quality rice.

Furthermore, understanding that consumer behavior dictates the direction of rice production reflects this change where the state was once the source of all demand. In a retail economy, consumer behavior is at the source of demand for consumer goods such as rice. However, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, consumers are not the only ones at the heart of this demand and desire. The Chinese state, recognizing citizens’ wishes to execute freedom in the market, is tapping into these desires and creating the means through which high quality goods can be bought and sold in the market. Essentially the Chinese state is both creating and tapping into consumers’ desires; by doing so, they are creating the means in the market to differentiate goods based on quality.

The Economy of Quality Food

The appearance of a number of local and/or organic food systems (i.e. alternative food networks) has drawn much attention to studies of agro-food systems (Goodman 1999; Murdoch et al. 2000; Jarosz 2000; Whatmore et al. 2003; Guthman 2004; Winter 2005; Cook et al. 2006). My study took some of the ideas that have emerged from this literature to understand how ideas of quality are formed and articulated in a setting where
retail markets and consumer cultures are developing. Through this changes, I have shown the mechanisms in place that constitute high quality rice. Whether it is consumer demand for high quality rice, rice breeders improving seeds for quality, farmers paying particular attention to the ways that they can improve and maintain high quality seeds, state technologies to promote and standardize high quality grain, or companies’ advertising strategies to promote high quality grain, many, if not all, actors along the commodity network of high quality Chinese northeast rice are actively engaged in producing high quality grain. My research shows that in a different economic and cultural setting where words like ‘local’ or ‘organic’ are not keywords in society (Williams 1983), other keywords like quality can take their place.

In China, ‘high quality’—whether in terms of a person’s quality (suzhi) or grain quality (zhiliang)—while not directly linked to one another, accentuate each other within the environment of China’s consumer culture. As the state promotes human quality and quality grain simultaneously, individuals are striving to achieve their own standards of quality through their choices in grain consumption. While many urban families choose to consume high quality grain, other individuals prefer not to consume grain at all. For the state, these practices are beneficial because the market now has a plethora of high quality grain, assisting the shift in grain production away from the high-yielding, low-quality grain. Moreover, if urban residents consume less grain, the state is under less pressure to produce enough grain to remain self-sufficient, and rural residents have greater access to a variety of grain.

As grain becomes a commodity in China’s new retail economy market, consumers are executing their freedom to pick and choose the rice they want. Increasingly, they are
choosing not to eat rice at all. The rice they are choosing to eat is high quality rice; these changes reflect broader changes that the Chinese diet is moving towards a more nutrition-less starch-based diet. The simple explanation for this shift is that as China’s economy develops, society goes through a ‘nutrition transition’ (Zhai et al. 2002) and diets become more diversified. What I have argued throughout the dissertation is that the push for high quality rice comes along with a broader shift in society where ideals of ‘quality’ are a part of China’s modernization process. As the Chinese state retreats from its role of dictating production numbers, it has inserted itself into the realm of China’s booming retail markets and consumer society. It has set up a series of quality and safety regulations of food where labels are attached to high quality northeast rice throughout their production and distribution cycles. What this case of high quality northeast rice has demonstrated is that the surrounding cultural context plays a vital role in understand what drives the market for that commodity.

While the use of cultural economy in agro-food studies has flourished, its application has been ambiguous as both a method and a theory. While Dixon (1999) provides a methodological model for cultural economy of food system that expands on commodity chain analyses, this model does not include more recent theoretical contributions to agro-food studies. Including these theoretical contributions broadens the greater political and cultural context in which a commodity exists, as we have seen with the ‘politics of quality’ in Chinese society. Moreover, we can understand the cultural economy of agro-food systems as a theoretical breaking point from commodity chains by understanding the channels through which commodities flow as networks. Within these
networks, the commodity is affected by a number of human and non-human factors that ultimately change the course of the commodity.

When a food commodity gets the label of ‘quality’ attached to it through consumer recognition, state regulatory or standardizing labels, or company marketing campaigns, a certain amount of value is placed on that commodity. Using the lens of cultural economy can explain where and how that label gets placed on the commodity. Moreover, cultural economy also provides insight into what happens to the commodity once it has obtained that label of quality. The value of commodities is shaped in a variety of different ways that rearticulate and reinforce that idea that food is a quality product. When examining food commodities—especially those considered to be high quality—in different political and cultural contexts, a cultural economy framework appropriately provides the methodological and theoretical tools necessary to identify and locate the ways value is attached to a product (see Zader forthcoming).

**The Making of Chinese Consumer-Citizens**

Judith Farquhar (2002) describes the phenomenon of Chinese banqueting with excess food in terms of post-socialism. Decades ago, the Chinese experienced ‘bad years,’ which consisted of hard physical labor and food shortages. During this time, choices and options were not available for most families during the socialist 1960s and 70s. Food was consumed strictly for sustenance, and families were told that to eat modestly was to advance the Chinese nation. Self-sufficiency in agriculture was one of Mao Zedong’s goals during this time, and he mobilized peasants in the countryside to produce grain while also limiting diets nationwide. In the post-Mao reform era, however,
as Farquhar documents, the memories of hunger and deficiency have driven food consumption practices to the point of excess. In this reform era, individual wealth is not only accepted but it is encouraged. Chinese banquets are large displays of wealth materialized through food on the table. This ‘excess’ is exaggerated so hosts are compelled to offer guests more than enough food (Farquhar 2002).

Part of the state’s modernization attempt is to shed China’s image in the world as a place of mass, cheap production practices. Instead, they want to promote an urban middle class of consumer-citizens. Quality in both of these cases (people and grain) materializes and is negotiated in different ways. What brings them together is the trend that ‘high quality’—urban, cosmopolitan, upper-middle class—people are beginning to consume less grain. Other members of society, taking note of this trend, are likely to follow, thus alleviating the demand for more grain in order for the state to reach its own grain self-sufficiency goals. Although this trend has yet to develop in rural areas, the rural population remains content because it is able to access and consume higher quality grain than it was just a couple decades ago.

In China today, the one-party state is balancing a plethora of goals as it manages its economy and governs its people. Perhaps the biggest challenge the state faces is how to maintain control of the population in light of its massive decentralization plans. Food security highlights this challenge as the foundation of these policies lay in the era of state socialist planning. The state continues to face pressure to feed its population, while also becoming more absent in the daily lives of its subjects. The one aspect of food consumption that differs dramatically from the Mao era is the plethora of food choices. The state is no longer obligated to make sure everyone is fed a bowl of grain with a meal,
but with the influx of grocery stores and international supermarkets in cities, people have more food choice options. These options can divert attention away from grain. Indeed, over the past two decades, China has witnessed the introduction of brands and advertising into the grain market. This new change has brought more grain selection in the market. With these changes, not only is grain quality becoming better, but in urban middle class food consumption patterns, people are consuming a lot less grain as they introduce more meat and dairy products into their diet. Overall wheat and rice consumption per household has been declining in recent years (USDA 2010).

The important thing about Chinese citizen-consumers is that there are 1.3 billion of them. Although Chinese society remains stratified and not all members are part of this so-called consumer society, they are all reaching towards goals and desires of maintaining an easier and more comfortable lifestyle through consumption. However, consumption uses a large number of resources. Even though labels like the Green Food label are designed to ensure consumers that they are consuming food grown in an ecological manner (McCoy 2000; Sanders 2000; 2006), rice production remains a resource-intensive project (Smil 2004). Although most producers did not report plans to expand rice production in the northeast, there was recognition that the intensive production had exhausted resources in the region. Although rice production and consumption does not have nearly the same environment implications as, say, each Chinese person driving his or her own car, what the commodity network of northeast rice has the ability to show us is the ways that the government is intricately involved in creating the desires that consumers articulate, as well as in creating the mechanisms and technologies that guide rice through the network.
The resource consumption associated with Chinese grain production raises questions of where China will go next to produce grain. As I showed in Chapter 5, grain production is clearly moving north within China. The northeast was one of the last great agricultural frontiers when Mao and the Chinese Communist Party took over in 1949. Since that time, the region has been transformed to China’s newest breadbasket. This begs the question of where will China turn next? Will it be western China where water resources are already extremely limited? Or will it be elsewhere in the world, perhaps Africa? Given the large amount of investment and industry China is heading in Africa (Michel and Beuret 2009), agriculture is certainly the next frontier that the Chinese have their eyes on (Rubenstein 2009).

Future Research Directions

I see three different routes through which I could take this research project in the future. The first is to examine China’s northeast rice through the perspectives of Japanese and Korean people and rice research scientists. The Japanese are notorious for their taste of high quality rice and for Japanese rice. At the same time, Japanese researchers have been working throughout China’s northeast for the past two-three decades to bring technology and knowledge for the Chinese to enhance and improve production in this region. Chinese have told me that they are grateful for the assistance of Japanese and Korean researchers working to improve rice strains. The one Korean researcher I was able to speak with during this research reported that Koreans are interested in the ways that rice is grown in China’s northeast and want to understand how

31 I was told a few years ago reports in Japan were released indicating that some Japanese rice had been ‘tainted’ with Chinese rice. These reports had caused a stir as the Japanese prefer their own rice and are skeptical of the methods that Chinese use (i.e. too much chemicals).
it differs from the rice in Korea. As these three countries work through tensions and increasing cooperation in Northeast Asia, in what ways does rice production and trade in the region alleviate or stimulate tensions? What role does nationalism play in the choices and attitudes towards rice grown outside one’s own country?

The second area of future research I would like to pursue deals with the discourse of nutrition and nutritional advice in China. As was perhaps most evident in Chapter 7, doing this research I found that rice consumption was declining for a variety of reasons in China. One of these reasons I that people are afraid rice and other starches and fine grains will make them fat. There appears to be little research done on contemporary eating habits and even the prevalence of eating disorders in China. However, many young women exhibit signs of eating disorders by expressing their fear of certain foods.

In contrast, much awareness has been raised about the effects of over-consumption and changing dietary patterns with children in China. In fact, the publication of the book *Fat China* indicates there is growing awareness and concern for overconsumption (French and Crabbe 2010). As China is transitioning socially, politically, and economically, its nutrition and nutritional guidelines are also changing significantly and rapidly. How will the Chinese government choose to manage its nutritional guidelines to include health issues associated with both overconsumption and underconsumption? What implications will changing grain consumption patterns have on food security?

The third area I would like to further explore is Chinese environmental activism surrounding food. My first idea for this project came from my interest in Chinese environmentalism, but I abandoned those ideas somewhere along the way. At first, I was
interested in understanding the ways the Western ideas of environmentalism and sustainable agriculture have influenced Chinese Green Food and organic farming practices and methods. However, as food safety concerns have emerged and intensified over the past few years as I was conducting this research, my ideas have shifted. While sustainable agriculture in the United States may refer to ideas of local and/or organic food, agriculture faces different challenges in China.

The sets of challenges China faces involve of course the reduction of overuse of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, but also include how to alleviate food being polluted by broader land and water pollution in China. This spring, reports from China emerged indicating that ten percent of all rice found in the market was tainted with cadmium, a heavy metal found in the land as a result of pollution in China’s southern industrialized regions (Wu 2011). This latest rice story comes in addition to past food safety scares including stories of melamine in powdered milk that soared through China just after the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Food safety and the lack of regulatory structures to ensure food quality is a growing concern among Chinese consumers. What types of organizing and consumer activism are forming around food safety issues? Where are participants of these movements directing the concerns? Are they attempting to raise public awareness? Or are their aims focused on the state regulatory systems?


http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-07/14/content_10102476.htm

China Green Food Development Center. 中国绿色食品发展中心 
http://www.greenfood.org.cn/sites/MainSite/

CNS (Chinese Nutrition Society). 中国营养学会 


