

Coming Home to the Land: Natural Farming as Therapeutic Landscape Experience
in Chengdu Plain, China

Jiawen Hu

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Reading Committee:
Robert Mugerauer, Chair
Miriam Kahn
Daniel B. Abramson
Jeffrey Hou

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Jiawen Hu

University of Washington

Abstract

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Jiawen Hu

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor Robert Mugerauer

Department of Urban Design and Planning

This ethnographic-phenomenological research aims to explore the phenomenon of peri-urban farming, rural-urban integration, and community building that are crystallized in Chengdu Plain, China in recent years. Through the lens of therapeutic landscape experience, individual and community well-being is examined with these questions: (1) what are participants' experience of farming in this landscape; (2) if this experience benefits well-being on physical, psychological, and spiritual levels; (3) how do elements in the landscape contribute to this experience; (4) how was a healthy grassroots community formed around the farm and what are the implications for the broader society.

The phenomenology of embodied experience, reflections on urbanization and urban life, and therapeutic landscape experience compose the theoretical framework. In line with this perspective based on the lifeworld experience, an ethnographic-phenomenological method is applied to this research, with specific instruments of case study, open-ended interview, and participatory observation. Emergent themes from the field work are summarized according to Freire's theory of critical dialogues.

I argue in this study that the case of Ningyuan in Chengdu Plain provides an alternative to current policies and processes of urbanization in contemporary China. In this specific context, connections are built between individuals, humans and nature, urban and rural sectors, and different social groups. A community based on shared ideas is formed and emplaced in this landscape. The distress from the fragmented life experience in post-reform China is relieved by resisting institutions and caring for the self, reconnecting to the land, empowering grassroots efforts, and disclosing themselves to one another in public spaces. Based on these discoveries, I suggest that to improve well-being of both rural and urban residents, planners and policy makers should recognize and consider the qualitative differences of each case in planning, and urbanization process should allow space for grassroots engagement, therefore to allow real *homecoming* for individuals and communities, physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

All interpretive phenomenological inquiry is cognizant of the realization that no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge. Therefore, it behooves us to remain as attentive as possible to life as we live it and to the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences. (Van Manen 2002, 7)

It is a cool June morning in a farm field in the outskirts of Chengdu, Sichuan, China. The sun just started radiating its warmth but some thin clouds prevent it from being too scorching. This is the ordinary weather all year round in Sichuan Basin. Several people who look like urbanites are working in the fields, bowing or crouching, weeding or watering. Bamboos and trees frame the background of a farmhouse in the distance, filling the eye with greenness; the chatting and laughter among the people pleases the ear.

Fu¹ is a middle-aged man, tall and thin, working hard in the field and always ready to tell jokes. With wrinkles around his eyes and tanned skin, he obviously stays in the sun a lot. His manner looks like he considers himself as a host or master of the field. His wife is a quieter woman, friendly and down to earth. Yang and his wife look younger and urbane, in their early thirties, with light skin color and a well-educated manner. Yang's wife has a scarf wrapping her head and partly covering her face, preventing it from being tanned by the sun. The two families' fields are next to each other and they obviously hang out quite often in the field and know each other well.

Fu (talking to the researcher): We've been farming here for five or six years. Actually I shared my experience from my visits to other organic farms with the family.

Yang is helping Fu with his yams, planting seeds and watering.

¹ Pseudonyms are used for people and places in this research for privacy and protecting research participants.

Yang: (When it's ready you can) harvest a hundred *jin*.²

Fu: Can I (surprised with happiness)?

Yang: (Quite seriously) For sure. I'll take 10 percent of it (laughing in a joking manner).

Fu: No problem. My field is large. We cooperate very well.

Yang's wife: (Smiling to Fu) with your presence, we're all very happy.

Fu: For sure. In this way we don't feel tired from doing hard work.

Some visitors (Gu couple) approach, looking at the field and their eyes full of wonder and surprise, and this group start talking to them enthusiastically. A lot of chatting on the harvesting and rent price. Fu is giving them basic information like a host.

Fu: Do you want to farm here?

Gu couple: Yeah, but we have no knowledge of it and no one to help...

Yang: That is not a problem. You can learn by trying. And you have to be quick! Last time when I checked with them (the host farmers) the waiting list was really long and you have to wait for at least three months.

They continue to chat, and the subjects of their conversation cover wide topics of farming techniques, other organic farms, food safety and so on.

Fu, Yang, Gu, and their friends and family are all urbanites who work and live in the nearby metropolitan city, Chengdu, in southwest China. Being worried about the pollution in the city and unsafe food provided by big manufacturers and distributed through global companies, they each rent a piece of land in Ningyuan Village in the periurban area of the city, so that they come

² *Jin* is a Chinese weight unit. One *jin* equals 500 grams or half a kilogram, a little more than a pound.

to garden in the village on weekends. This research is primarily about these people's farming experience here: how it is related to the physical landscape, how participants build a community from the bottom up, and how this experience benefits individuals, communities and the environments in different aspects in the context of unprecedented urbanization and a rapidly changing ethos.

1.1 Background

“When we first came here, Beijingers treated us like dogs. Many times when I knocked on their doors to ask if there was any space available for rent, they looked at me through the slightly open door as if I were a thief or beggar, then yelled at me: ‘Hey! You outsider, get out of here.’” (Zhang 2001, 70)

China is undergoing unprecedentedly rapid urbanization which has brought issues that affect individuals' and communities' well-being in multiple aspects. The quote above is a vivid depiction of the mutual fear between urban residents and newcomers from the rural side, as well as the feeling of tension, anger, and other negative emotions that cloud well-being. Similar to western urbanization in earlier times, physical problems exist, such as crowding, noise, pollution and so forth, resulting in diseases and inferior health (Howarth 1976). In the psycho-social aspect, loneliness and the disruption of community, rate of change, competition and the lack of security (Howarth 1976; Levy and Visotsky 1969) undermine mental well-being. While the urbanite is forced to negotiate throngs and adjust to rapidly changing economic and technological phenomena, real physical contact and substantive interaction with others actually decrease. Although the dependence on one another increases, the division of labor and specialization result in a lack of community and a retreat back to family and individuals (Clapp 1978). Ethical relativism guides the rapidly changing cities, while small, rural communities possessed firm rules of order, meaning and purpose (Clapp 1978; Thompson 2009). All these factors result in the urban dweller's *existential homelessness* (Mugerauer 1994), the main “disease” that needs to be healed; this alienation is the opposite of making meaning of human life, having a wholesome relationship between the self and the other, and dwelling healthily in the world.

1.1.1 Food safety

Similar to the US in the early twentieth century, food safety has become an increasingly serious issue in contemporary China. Large scale, well-publicized incidents of polluted, fraudulent or toxic foods infecting human health spread anxiety and concern nationally. Now China is infamous for “the rampant production of toxic milk powder, toxic eggs, toxic seafood, gutter oil, carcinogenic vegetables and fruit” (Yan 2013), and most families are aware of this fact.

Supermarkets modeled on those in the West came to China about fifteen years ago. Some people turn to mass-produced and distributed foods sold in supermarkets, in the hope that big brands are more trustworthy than local market produce. Some still persist in patronizing lower-cost, farmers markets that have been around for decades. Some take an indifferent position and leave it to chance, hoping that food-related issues don’t happen to their families. Some start growing food on their own balconies (Ye 2012), only trusting themselves. Still others, who form the focus of this study, have returned to the countryside and re-engage with the decentralized agricultural practices of local farmers, reconnecting with nature and one another, knowing that “the concentration of trade in the hands of powerful merchant companies has had menacing consequences for public health; when a harmful substance is added to a food, an entire country, even the whole continent (Europe), is threatened” (Freidberg 2004, 33).

As the subjects of this research will demonstrate, reconnection with rural farming methods and social inter-relationships can produce better, more nutritious foods and a greater sense of community and shared endeavor than now exists.

1.1.2 Urbanization and social disparity between urban and rural sectors

Although in Mao’s era peasants and the countryside were highly recognized in official discourses, their rights, in reality, were less supported and often deprived, resulting in a very disadvantaged social status compared to their fellow citizens in cities. Contrary to Mao’s intention of developing the countryside and distributing wealth more evenly, the quality of life divide between the urban and rural areas grew during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Brown 2012). Because many aspects of the social welfare system were not extended to rural people, the economic reforms started in the late 1970s triggered the large-scale rural to urban migration,

which has become one of the most serious social issues in contemporary China (Anagnost 2013, 6). Now, wealth still remains largely concentrated in cities: while national economic growth has amazed the whole world for several decades, “an estimated 394 million rural Chinese still subsist on less than \$2 a day” (Hanstad 2013). Not only the income but other socio-economic indicators like life expectancy also reflect the substantial difference between rural and urban dwellers, and currently the annual rural-to-urban migration population is estimated at about 10 million (Hanstad 2013).

With this disparity, urbanization, instead of improving the rural condition, is presented as one of the main goals of the new political leaders, embodied in the flow of the land, labor, and capital from the rural to the urban sector.³ A nationwide survey conducted by Landesa⁴ in 2011 with more than 1,700 farmers reported that one out of seven villages experienced government seizures of their farmland in 2010 alone, many without being consulted or compensated (Hanstad 2013). And this practice is widely publicized as “increasing rural and urban integration,” without providing farmers “urban social security, access to urban schools, and coveted urban residency permits (*hukou*) in exchange for their land” (Hanstad 2013).

In this context, New Socialist Countryside Construction is a newly promoted political campaign with the aim of investing in rural infrastructure construction to attract capital, according to the economists such as Justin Yi-Fu Lin.⁵ With this incentive, it is not hard to understand that urban-rural integration or improving quality of life in the rural sector is not so much the ultimate goal but more a slogan. Bottom-up studies cast doubt on the inability of local governments to implement policies and the feasibility of policies themselves (Ahlens 2014, 435). The vast range of villages that are involved and influenced by this movement makes it a major issue to discuss in current Chinese society. Ningyuan Village, the field of this research, serves as a counter-example within this larger flow of land, labor and capital from the countryside to cities. Here,

³ Wen Tiejun. Workshop on new rural development in China, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2013.

⁴ Landesa is a global development non-profit that works to secure land rights for the world’s poor. <http://www.landesa.org/>.

⁵ Wen Tiejun. Workshop on new rural development in China, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2013. Justin Yi-Fu Lin is former World Bank Vice President, with a specialization in agricultural economics.

city dwellers intermingle with and learn from rural residents remaining on the land, who can teach them methods of raising crops. Ningyuan Village, however, is also undergoing a process of (re)construction, and this research examines the conflict between villagers' practice and governmental aims. Peasants have long been considered the lowest class in the social hierarchy, the least respected and recognized, but, in this case, farmers are viewed as experts and teachers by the community established around them. A more harmonious social relationship is observed, which provides hope against this dim social background. Similar to other rural areas, the studied village and its practices are also threatened by urban expansion, and it is hard to anticipate whether and when it will be wiped from the map. This research tries to document Ningyuan's practice as a promising new phenomenon and a potentially beneficial example to which the governmental authors of the New Socialist Countryside Construction can refer.

1.1.3 Struggle for survival and meaning

It might be a recent phenomenon in China that while rural migrant workers feel anxious about survival and future in the city, the urban, better-off classes become to find it hard to figure out the meaning or reason for their existence. Although many of urban dwellers are still striving to pursue a better material life (Zhang 2010), the group who are frustrated and concerned with the non-material aspects of their quality of life is growing. While the rural migrant feels anxious about surviving in expanding cities, the well-fed, urban, privileged class, too, has developed significant anxieties. Increasingly, some at the top of the social hierarchy are coming to grips with purposelessness and a sense of disconnection from anchoring aspects of life. Government officials, the most secure, socially respected and well-to-do class, feel "lost in the big city because I didn't know what was the purpose of life and I felt confused and I felt depression sometimes," "It felt so boring. The job was boring. Life was boring. Everything was boring" (Schmitz 2013). Some of them choose to move to remote rural areas to find peace, and escaping urban China has even become fashionable. Some who have chosen this marginal life have become minor celebrities through online forwarding and media coverage (Schmitz 2013).

Those who stay in the city sacrifice their health and happiness, in a word, their well-being. China watchers have noticed urban middle class discontent about environmental degradation (Johnson

2013). “All we want is fresh air and safe, natural food,” a couple who quit their jobs in Beijing and moved into mountains wrote. They also found a better and more interesting social relationship in their new life, mostly with “journalists, writers, artists, creative types.” “We talk about our dreams and how life should be lived. That’s the last topic urban dwellers in China want to talk about.” Their friends working in big companies drink too much while networking and constantly feel sick. “On paper, it was a good job: I owned company shares, medical insurance, a pension fund. But I would give that all up for a healthier life” (Schmitz 2013).

In sum, while people feel highly insecure about survival and unprepared in the competitive environment, those who are socially privileged struggle with “so what” and aspire to find a “somewhere else” to get meaning and significance of life. This research touches on both groups: the former being peasants, rural migrant workers, young employees, and the latter including white collar workers, the managerial class and other well-to-do groups, discussing their existential anxiety and its resolution with rural life and gardening.

Farmers in Ningyuan Village have been practicing organic farming and offering farming opportunities to urban people, and their rural landscape is observed as a potential site for therapeutic experience. The kind of practice that Ningyuan is employing is considered as alternativism that resists to be incorporated into the neoliberal system by rural development scholars (Hale 2013). It has attracted urban farmers, artists, environmentalists, community-supported agriculture (CSA) organizations, college students, elementary and middle school children, agriculture experts, and advocates for organic farming with domestic and international backgrounds. While rapid urbanization threatens rural landscapes and the well-being of both rural and urban residents, the peacefulness and natural beauty, intimate physical contact with the land, and the sense of community among participants have been observed here. This potential therapeutic landscape experience, which is defined as a positive physiological and psychological outcome deriving from a person’s imbrication within a particular socio-natural-material setting (Conradson 2005, 339), is worth exploring in a deeper and more comprehensive manner.

1.2 Research questions

Based on the context of Ningyuan Village, the elements of this landscape and the therapeutic experience raise research questions:

(1) What are people's experiences of farming in a rural landscape and do they feel their well-being recovered, maintained, or promoted in these places?

(2) How does the village landscape's physical characteristics, natural and built, its social contexts, and symbolic meanings (Curtis 2010; Gesler 1993; Eyles and Williams 2008) contribute to people's experiences? And what makes experiences in landscapes therapeutic or not?

(3) How does the complex grassroots community, composed of farmers and white collar professionals and others, mutually support one another and provide a positive example of social well-being?

(4) Ultimately, what do therapeutic landscapes and organic farming mean to individuals and the society in this case? What are the implications for "urban disease" and therapeutic landscapes in contemporary Chinese society? What implications does the Ningyuan case have for China's contemporary anomie?

1.3 Theoretical framework

Embodied experience of place (Casey 1993; Merleau-Ponty 1962), anti-urbanism in western history (Clapp 1978; Simmel 1997), and therapeutic landscape studies (Conradson 2005) compose the theoretical framework. This research looks at people's experience in landscapes from the perspective of bodily senses as the fundamental way of cognition, examines contemporary Chinese urban life through the lens of western anti-urbanism theory, and explores different aspects of therapeutic landscapes, including physical, social, and symbolic elements, investigating how they will potentially heal "urban diseases."

1.3.1 Embodied experience of place

Landscapes as place are experienced in an embodied way. The importance of place for human existence and the mutual constitution between place and the mind-body complex have been emphasized in scholarly works. From a phenomenological perspective, the world is given to consciousness, an embodied rather than purely conceptual consciousness derived from concrete human experience. Malpas defines experience as human existence as it comprises capacities to think, to feel, to grasp, to act and so on (1999, 16). Human existence is always already in place, and place shapes people's memories, feelings, and thoughts. Hence the inside and outside, the mind and world, are transformed one into the other, and the body functions as the membrane between inside and outside and the nexus of place experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Human existence as "being-in-the-world" cannot be separated from the environ's space and place: the body anchors, situates, and orients human beings in place, and human experience, subjectivity, and thought are structured through the body in place. The body, experience, place, and human existence are intertwined and inseparable; although any reduction of this complex relationship into aspects is more or less a simplification, for convenience of exploration this section will examine the dynamic between the body and place on various levels.

On a primitive and pragmatic level, experience of space and place is structured unselfconsciously by basic individual experiences, associated with the movement of the body and with the senses (Relph 1976, 9). The moving body conditions the position of objects, and the world is given along with the parts of the body. A basic grasp of space, for instance the concept of above and below, front and back, and left and right derive from our upright bodily structure and the mode of movement of human bodies (Casey 1993; Malpas 1999). An infant and an adult have different worlds; sitting on the floor or standing in a room, we have different feelings of the interior space; a walking pedestrian and a car driver have different perceptions and experiences of streets and other urban landscapes. The perspective at issue in the constitution of subjective space is not merely a passive "point of view," but a perspective of active engagement. A grasp of subjective space involves not merely visual or perceptual acquaintance with one's environment, but also a grasp of the manner of one's causal embedding in that environment (Malpas 1999, 51).

At a perceptual level, space or place is perceived subjectively, and the spatial experience is arranged with the center of the body (Relph 1976). In this way, the basic concept of here and there, and near and far are understood (Casey 1993). Perceptual space is also the realm of direct emotional encounters with place and influence people's mind. Tuan (1977) considers that the identity of place ties to bodily experience and emotion. Through bodily engagement with natural and built places, human consciousness, emotion, memory, and thought are arranged and constituted. Meanings are constructed in this form of bodily engagement in and with place, which is "an organized world of meaning" according to Tuan (1977, 179). Ultimately, it is in interaction with space that human subjectivity is constituted, as human agents have to locate and orient themselves in spatiality, and the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place (Malpas 1999).

At a social and existential level, experience of place is shared to a greater extent, among individuals in the same cultural group; it is intersubjective and amenable to all members according to a common set of experiences, signs, and symbols (Relph 1976). For instance, rituals in sacred space maintain and reinforce cultural identity and sense of place through bodily practice; physical building of houses according to the cosmic power manifest belief and social order (Saile 1985). Existential experience of space or place also affects bodies and mind in the cultural group. Arranging human bodies in different positions, places define social roles and relations, as well as relationship between human and the cosmos (Saile 1985; Tuan 1977). As mentioned above, human subjectivity is constructed in place, and intersubjectivity is also made possible in place (Malpas 1999) through embodied experience of space. Shared experience of existential space is a triangulation of intersubjectivity; social and political identity and subjectivity is made possible through "action and speech" in the public realm, otherwise people cease to be humans (Arendt 1959). Western urban history shows that the pursuit of bodily pleasure and the effort to avoid bodily pain results in fear, segregation, and other social wounds in space (Sennett 1994), and a "space of appearance" where people show up and engage in embodied words and deeds serves as an antidote to the problem caused by the dulled bodily experience and practice. Massey (2005) suggests an "embodied responsibility for space" in a similar sense, which emphasizes presence and practice in the relational space constituted by events and human action. In sum, bodily engagement with places in existential or social space

creates individual and cultural identity, as well as meaning and purpose of human existence.

Conversely, experience of place influences human bodies too (Malpas 2011). People fit their bodies into place; farmers and tennis players adjust bodily posture and movement to meet the requirements of their activity; typewriters are “incorporated into bodily space” so that typing is possible to be practiced (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Embodied engagement with landscapes also engenders emotional ties and spiritual inspiration (Tuan 1990). In sum, place and the mind-body complex are mutually constitutive: the body is always already emplaced, and without the body there is no experience of place.

The case of this research involves embodied experience of place. Organic farming is bodily engagement with the land, plants, farming tools, and other people in the farm. Planting and harvesting, weeding and removing insects and vermin all require intensive physical work. This research aims to investigate the mutual constitution and influence between bodily practice and place, especially the benefits of the mind-body complex from physically engaging with place, namely therapeutic landscape experience in this case.

1.3.2 Anti-urbanism: a reaction to decreasing embodied experience and contemporary homelessness

In spite of the importance of bodily engagement with place, with the mediation of tools and machines, embodied experience of contemporary place has decreased dramatically. Physical contact with either place or other people is blunted in the contemporary urban milieu (Tuan 1990), and engagement with the world is more passive and reticent (Sennett 1994; Simmel 1997). Farmers’ intimate experience with the land is little-known (Tuan 1990), and urbanites engage with nature less, and social space is more fragmented and segregated (Arendt 1959; Sennett 1994). Moreover, virtual communication tools further reduce face-to-face connection among people and attract people into the intangible, non-bodily world.

Anti-urbanism is a reaction to such problems. Real physical contact and connections decrease, and emotional and psychological engagement with place and people diminishes too. Money-based economies contribute to objectification and depersonalization, facilitating a calculating

rationality that intensifies alienation in urban environments. Besides mental and spiritual disturbance, physiological issues like stress gradually become a serious public health issue in cities (Folkman 2011; Harrington 2013). The negative sentiment towards cities and escaping them also result from practical concerns. To be closer to nature, benefiting from low taxes, getting more land, achieving safety especially for children, are also aspects of anti-urbanism and still in play in the contemporary context (Jackson 1987).

Intellectually there is a consistent history of being wary of the city, which is theorized by scholars, politicians and designers. Emerson's essay *Nature* served as a protest against the city, taking the countryside as "the school of Reason," while the city could result in moral crisis, being artificial, destroying solitude, poetry, and philosophy. Dewey worries about the loss of respect for the values that the small community supported and nourished, and showed a growing fear that this loss of respect would undermine democracy. George Santayana suggested that cities like New York naturally despise any ideal that is not a living purpose, and the world is suffering from an excess of strangers and Hegelian alienation. Jefferson believed in the ownership of private property as conducive to individual freedom when farm land was the most typical and useful form of private property. For Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, the city scene was a backdrop for frightening experiences, such as personal defeat, icy intellectualism, heartless commercialism, miserable, poverty, crime and sin, smoke and noise, dusk and loneliness, and commercialization. Sociologist Jane Addams felt sympathy for recent immigrants uprooted from their native communities, who had given up the satisfactions of skilled craftsmanship for the monotonous duties of the factory. Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Henri Sullivan thought in line with romantic theorists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, concerned about with mobocracy in the city, calling for an organic and natural life, lower density, decentralization, with the former's Broad-acre city as a physical manifestation (White and White 1981).

Ebnezer Howard's Garden City movement was another planning practice that is related to anti-urbanism, particularly concerned with the overcrowding and deterioration of cities. The original garden city was planned as a concentric form with open spaces, public parks and six radial boulevards. Howard based it on a combination of the city and the countryside, to provide the working class an alternative to working on farms or the unhealthy city (Howard and Osborn

1965). It widely influenced urban planning theory and practice in England, Australia, and North America. Although not part of Howard's idea, garden suburbs were a result from garden city movement (Hall 1988). Suburbanization, one of the most studied phenomena in the planning profession now, is a misunderstanding of the movement and partly a result of anti-urbanism. Contemporary planning ideas, such as New Urbanism and Intelligent Urbanism are also influenced by Garden City Movement.

Anti-urbanism also contributed to the City Beautiful Movement that originated in North American cities following the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Part of it concerned about "moral and civic virtue among urban populations", and has influenced urban planning in Australia (Wilson 1989).

Similarly, a negative attitude toward the city has a history in China. In the classical time, Chinese dynasties prioritized agriculture and disdained commercial activities. Regimes paid special attention to the rural area and land management. The countryside was politically and economically supported by governments, and at the same time culturally euphonized by poets and painters, such as mountain-water painting and idyll poetry by Tao Qian and Wang Wei, longing for nature, peace, and solitude. After Mao and his cadre established the PRC government in 1949, consistent support for agriculture was prevalent in the official discourse, in line with the Marxist ideology; rapid industrialization and urbanization, however, changed the landscape soon (Lin 1998).

In the contemporary Chinese context, the above mentioned "urban diseases" also exist. Similar to the situation of early 20th century in the western world, China is undergoing rapid urbanization, which manifests itself as neoliberal objectification of people and confusion of social and cultural values. Diminishing bodily engagement with place and other people contributes to existential homelessness. State and capital control denies human subjectivity, and generates individual and social issues that relate to human well-being requiring resolution.

As a potential therapeutic landscape, the research field Ningyuan Village is known to provide healthy food. Participants report positive experiences of farming, spending time in nature, and reconnecting with people and a new growing community. This research tries to explore the

therapeutic elements of these landscapes, and how the engagement with them relieves problems caused in the capitalized urban environments.

1.3.3 Therapeutic landscape experience

The concept and components of therapeutic landscapes were first brought forward by Gesler, recognizing places, settings, situations, locales, and milieux as encompassing physical/built, symbolic and social environments that work to achieve an “enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental, and spiritual healing” (Gesler 1993, 171). Milligan (2004) considers therapeutic landscape as a place that “...promotes wellness by facilitating relaxation and restoration and enhancing some combination of physical, mental and spiritual healing”. It is agreed that therapeutic landscapes not only compensate or facilitate recovery but also promote and maintain good health (Conradson 2005; Milligan 2004).

As pointed out above, the framework of therapeutic landscape includes physical, social, and symbolic environments. As environmental perception always involves human action (Gifford 2002; Sell and Zube 1984) instead of only the physical existence of the landscape or the passive status of viewing the landscape, Conradson further proposes the concept of therapeutic landscape experience, which means a positive physiological and psychological outcome deriving from a person’s imbrication within a particular socio-natural-material setting (2005, 339). Here the mode of self-landscape encounter and interaction is emphasized; not only the landscape influences health, but the relational engagement between human and the landscape also plays a crucial role in the health outcome. This research focuses on two aspects of therapeutic landscape experiences: individual and social healing.

Individual healing could be at several levels. Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing are observed in some places with healing potentials. Potential therapeutic landscapes provide opportunities for individual and social healing. Bodily engagement with place, especially nature and gardens, facilitates physical movement, connection with nature and other people, contemplation on one’s life, and deeper understanding of meaning. In this way, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing at the individual level is obtained. The body gets fresh air and physical exercise in the process of moving, engaging with soil and plants and people.

Physiological problems such as stress could be relieved through bodily work and social connections. Understanding one's place in the immense natural ecosystem underscores the importance of interdependent, reciprocal and cyclic behavior. In this vast setting, one is small but not insignificant, a contributing agent in a larger natural order. In nature, a balance is struck between egoism and insignificance. Study of life shows its fragility and its persistence.

From the perspective of medical care, healing gardens within healthcare settings, as the main category of therapeutic landscapes, could facilitate three aspects of the healing process: achieving a degree of relief from physical symptoms or awareness of those symptoms; stress reduction and increased levels of comfort for an individual dealing with the emotionally and physically trying experiences of a medical setting; facilitating an improvement in the overall sense of well-being and hopefulness that an individual is experiencing and thereby assisting physical improvement (Marcus and Barnes 1999, 3).

Ulrich (1999) discovers that viewing of nature reduces time spent in hospital and doses of medicine that's needed. Besides, patient anxiety is reduced, blood pressure lowered, and less pain felt. Stress as "...a process of responding to events and environmental features that are challenging, demanding, or threatening to well-being" (Ulrich 1999, 32) is the core of the theory of supportive garden design. Hence gardens in healthcare institutions were the focus of early research on therapeutic landscapes. Essential features of healing gardens include natural elements, aesthetic and sensory qualities, safety or comfort, privacy or solitude, opportunities for movement, opportunities for exploration and challenge, easy access, and supportive social environment (Marcus and Barnes 1999).

With the development of the discipline of health geography, the concept of and research on therapeutic landscapes expands as well as the concept of healing. Non-patients are considered to benefit from therapeutic landscapes too. High speed and overstimulation of modern society tend to cause directed attention deficit, and therapeutic landscapes, especially natural elements help to recover from it (Kaplan 1989). Kaplan (1989) also defined several levels of healing, namely clearing the mind, recovering directed attention, promoting mental health with "soft fascination" of nature, inspiring reflections on one's life and spiritual benefits.

Spiritual healing is difficult to define but is reflected in most empirical studies on therapeutic landscapes. From a theoretical perspective, Chuengsatiansup (2003) argues that in a new paradigm that is different from a reductionist one, spirituality as an emerging phenomenon is impossible to be reduced to elements, and should be incorporated into health impact assessment of environments. Rather than defined and reduced, it is realized and practiced in embodied experience.

Real-world experiences support this opinion. De Botton (2002) describes his spiritual experience in sublime landscapes and why it is healing: sublime landscapes allow us to conceive of our inadequacy in a new and more helpful way, helping us accept our limitation and to respect the cosmic order. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) try to understand the wilderness setting as inspiring spirituality in the outdoor challenge program, and the common theme of healing is finding meaning in one's life. Elements of participants' experience include awe with nature, group trust, direct contact with nature, certain periods of solitude, and physical challenge. Peak and flow as self-growth are reported too. The authors also point out that this is not merely a superficial guided tour but established deep identification and sense of place. Williams (2010) examines spiritual healing in a reputed pilgrimage site. Her observation shows that this place provides emotional relief and spiritual replenishment, especially opportunities for deep reflection, contemplation and meditation. Heintzman (2010) considers spiritual healing and growth as the expansion of one's consciousness of larger communities, graduating from the self to family and other people, and ultimately to the larger world, and this experience helps to abandon the narrow self and recover from personal problem or trauma. In this way, people find purpose or meaning in their lives, which is an antidote to the valuelessness of modern life (Maslow 1982).

Besides individual healing, research and theories on social and political healing are another dimension that is particularly relevant to this research. As examples in ancient Athens, Adonia and Thesmophoria were festivals for females providing a way of healing social oppression through bodily and political expression (Sennett 1994); rituals of the night in the Jewish Ghetto in Medieval Venice healed social wounds and segregation; Thoreau's (1951) reclusive life in Walden is silent resistance to industrial civilization, through which he gained inner expansion.

These practices did not destroy the dominant order but created a more complex life for the bodies that the dominant order sought to rule (Sennett 1994, 374). Contemporary empirical studies also show that people feel empowered and more confident by participating in therapeutic landscapes, including pilgrimage, gardening, and so forth (Francis and Hester 1990; Milligan 2004; Osterrieth 1997).

Several common themes are reported as either environmental triggers or healing outcomes of therapeutic landscape experience. According to Kaplan's theory of different healing levels (1989), being away from one's daily routines in mechanized cities and spending time alone in solitude provide opportunity for clearing the mind and restore directed attention (Conradson 2005; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Kaplan 1989; Lewis 1990; Marcus and Barnes 1999; Milligan 2004; Williams 2010). Peace, tranquility, and joy are experienced by subjects. Moreover, solitude provides the opportunity to reflect on one's life and wider context of the world, which is deeply restorative.

It is not surprising that connection is always reported in these studies, as an antidote to the more and more separated world (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985). Home is a status of being-at-home-in-the-world, which connotes a sense of existential control and connectedness (Jackson 1995, 154). People experience connecting to the self in wilderness (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Hoshino 2007), connecting to nature (Heintzman 2010; Kaplan 1989; Lewis 1990; MacCannell 1990; Ulrich 1999) in gardening activity, connecting to other people and a larger community in gardening, festivals, pilgrimage, and other group exploration activities (Conradson 2005; Curtis 2010; Milligan 2004; Schmidt and Little 2007; Williams 2010), and connecting to a higher power and sublimity through group ritual (De Botton 2002; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2010; Hoshino 2007; Kaplan 1989).

Self-growth and the sense of fulfillment are frequently mentioned, corresponding to Maslow's theory of self-growth as the highest health and happiness (1982), and the idea of flow as optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Related environmental features include challenge, newness, and nature, especially when bodily hardship exists (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2010; Hoshino 2007; Kaplan 1989; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987; Milligan 2004). When being

physically challenged by obstacles, striving to overcome them can result in highly optimal “peak experiences” or *flow*. New dimensions of the self emerge and the feeling of fulfillment is exhilarating; people can experience even the loss of self and feel fully absorbed into the environment, resulting in a sense of wholeness and the breakdown of subject/object separation.

In sum, activities in environments that provide opportunities for nature, solitude, connectedness, newness and challenge are potential environments that facilitate therapeutic landscape experience (Heintzman 2010; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987; Lewis 1990; MacCannell 1990; Osterrieth 1997; Williams 2010). Ningyuan Village is viewed as a potential therapeutic landscape. This research will consider the multi-faceted effects of re-experiencing rural existence, including how individuals can recover health in unpolluted and uncrowded surroundings, how deep exposure to natural processes and beauty can influence state of mind, and how farming and other social activities can catalyze beneficial interpersonal relationships.

1.4 Methods and Research Design

According to the nature of the research questions, phenomenological methods including in-depth interviews and direct and participatory observation, archival research and documentation are employed to explore research questions described above (Figure 1). Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2007) and a critical dialogue (Freire 1970; 1992) are used to analyze information collected from the field. Themes emerge from open-ended interviews and ANT is used to trace the way communities are built and benefit members. Critical dialogues open up the complex lifeworld, the totality of everyday life experienced in our subjectivity (Husserl 1970) of research participants and generate thick description of the case being studied. ANT investigates the forming of networks, emphasizing not only human participants but also objects including various landscape elements, in this case.

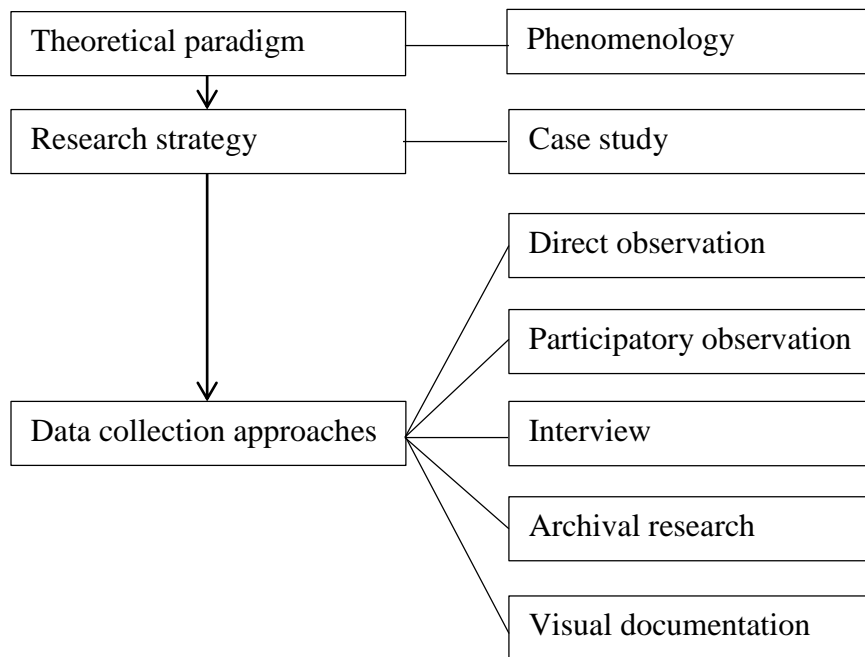


Figure 1. Information collecting methods in this research.

1.4.1 Phenomenology as the theoretical paradigm

Phenomenology is the theoretical paradigm and the main research strategy of this research, guiding the selection of research methods and the process of data collection, analysis, and report writing. Phenomenology focuses on getting back to the phenomenon, which includes the place and embodied experience of place in this research. Phenomenology is especially appropriate in situations when little research has been done in the area being studied. Besides, phenomenology is applied as a middle ground between overly relativism and simplistic objectivism, and remains a method to avoid bias.

Therapeutic landscape experience in the Chinese context is an area not studied yet, and direct exploration of this phenomenon meets the goal of this research well. Besides, phenomenology of place in this research could avoid either the fundamentalist view that takes therapeutic potentials of places as given or inherited, or the deconstructive perspective that views all therapeutic experience as socially constructed, having nothing to do with the landscape. Phenomenology of place takes a middle way to see therapeutic potentials and to let places speak, avoiding “the Scylla of the constructivists and the Charybdis of the essentialists” (Lane 2002, 5).

1.4.2 Case study as the research strategy

As a qualitative research strategy, exploration of cases provides details and context-dependent information, which is necessary to move from lower to higher levels of knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2011). It also investigates mutually-related multiple factors and the complexity of social phenomena, and leads to specific narratives.

The focus of this research, human experience, is a subject that can hardly be quantified; narratives meet the goal of looking deeply into facts and complex relationships. Therefore, the richness and complexity of case studies are appropriate for this research as the main strategy of inquiry.

Several specific approaches to data collection were applied in the framework of both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology and are discussed as follows.

1.4.3 Data collection tools

Archival research and documentation

Background information of the site was gathered from pamphlets and websites of various organizations, online blogs of multiple authors, related diaries, memos, and other articles appearing in the mass media. Maps and charts of the geographical characteristics or layouts of places were also sought in the field. Note-taking and visual documentation were carried out during the field work, focusing on potential therapeutic elements and other factors that influence the experience on site.

Direct and participatory observation

As stated above, following phenomenological procedures, looking at the lifeworld activity in order to discern gradually underlying structures of experiences, direct and participatory observation were the main tools to study place in this research.

I practiced farming with local farmers to experience bodily engagement with the land and nature. I joined visitors in their experiential programs to participate, observe, and understand their activities and experiences on site. Direct phenomenological observation was also based on these participatory activities, as one of the main research methods in the framework of case study. Physical, social, and symbolic dimensions of potential therapeutic landscapes were investigated, and special attention was paid to embodied experience of place and movement in the landscape.

Interview

Understanding people's experience is one of the difficulties of this research. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were applied to gain access to the mental worlds of diverse individuals as another specific research method fitting the framework of phenomenological study. It gives the opportunity to learn perceptions and interpretations of others, which we would never experience ourselves (Weiss 1994). Reasons to conduct this qualitative interview study include developing detailed and holistic descriptions of people's experience, integrating multiple perspectives, describing process, and learning how places are interpreted (Weiss 1994).

Freire's critical dialogue (1970; 1992) is the core idea that guided the interviews carried out in the research process. As opposed to the approach of "banking knowledge," the interview was a mutual process between the researcher and research participants. Assuming that the two ends in the communication are in equal positions, the interviews were world-mediated, and generative themes emerged in this creative process. Ultimately, acknowledging humans as incomplete beings, the critical dialogue method attempts to enable both the researcher and participants to be fully human.

This research started with convenience sampling, interviewing farmers and visitors to Ningyuan Village whom the researcher could encounter comfortably. It is followed by snowball sampling as mutual familiarity grew. I selected subjects to maximize variation in order to collect more information concerning different experiences in place. Informants were generally divided into three groups in each site: visitors who spent a fairly long time engaging with the place and were considered important participants of the community, visitors who started to participate in the community or paid short visits, and were considered as periphery members, and residents who

lived in the site as core participants. In addition, there were key-informants who have observed these phenomena for a long time and could provide deeper and wider background information, such as organizers of environmental education programs in Ningyuan Village. Interview questions were non-structured but basic opening questions were included; for visitors, the interview was based on their own experience; and for residents, these were also from their observation of the site and the visitors.

1.4.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi 2009), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, et al. 2009) and critical dialogues (Freire 1970; 1992) were applied to analyze the information collected and to understand the therapeutic landscape experience of gardening for individuals and the community. Themes were discovered from observation and interviews, elements of therapeutic landscape experience were described, and detailed narratives were developed from data collected in the field.

Actor-network theory (ANT) was used to explore and describe specifically the forming and functioning of the community around the core family being studied. As a complex system, the community's formation and structure were traced through different connections and relationships of members and participants. ANT is considered valid in this research as it treats the dynamics of a community as processes and takes both objects as well as human agencies as actors or mediators of a network (Latour 2007). ANT proves especially useful to many studies of the food system. In contrast to traditional social network analysis, ANT assumes that nature is not just an environment or resource for human activity but is itself an agent, participating in the collective action of networks in diverse and not always predictable or controllable ways (Freidberg 2004, 11).

1.4.5 Clusters of themes

Therapeutic landscape experience explored in this research is rich and diverse, reflected in various themes related to human experience of healing and well-being. After finding specific themes that emerged from observation and interviews, they were grouped into broader clusters of

themes that capture the shared core and structure of specific themes. Clusters were listed and described in the aim to extract a main motif of therapeutic landscape experience in this research.

1.4.6 Writing style

To protect informants for this research, their real names are not disclosed. I have coded their surnames and narrated their stories and experiences with labels that I derived from the coding process. Pseudonyms are also used for the site and all people with whom I communicated, including those whose names were unknown to me. To avoid confusion, another note on people's names is that following the Chinese habit, family names are put before given names.

Compared to a structured writing style, the result of this report is presented in a more emergent and discursive way. The nature of phenomenological writing is like “finding the way through darkness” (Van Manen 2002, 2) so the layout of the text is less preplanned but more letting thoughts flow in a free manner.

Some concepts discussed in this study are not defined or only vaguely so, such as “existence,” “spiritual,” “home,” “health,” etc. It would be tempting to give them definitions but I am aware of the difficulty. These ideas probably resist defining ultimately: most of the literature, poetry, films, painting, music, other forms of art, and philosophy, are about them. They are so immense and profound that we all know what they are, but we cannot limit them by drawing a boundary. Buddhists say that concepts are nominal entities (Skt. *prajñapti*) for the convenience of communication (Kalupahana 1992). Similarly, to make it possible to have this academic discussion I refer to these terms, knowing that they themselves are beyond the scope of this dissertation and my capability, and probably that is where scholarship should stop—that is the territory of mystery and the experiential world, transcending intellectual reflections and rationality.

The above being explained, there are approximate definitions by leading scholars and theorists that are widely used and accepted. Since this dissertation is a phenomenological exercise and because the phenomenological tradition of philosophy, psychology, medicine, and psycho-

therapy has consistent definitions and interpretations of the core phenomena and concepts, these are the ones I use. They can be cited here as a common ground from which to proceed.

Heidegger provides the fundamental interpretation and definition of “existence” as the concrete *facticity* of being-in-the-world with others, where we are thrown at birth into an already existing social-cultural and natural milieu that is particularly located historically and geographically (in a specific time and place). The unavoidable human task is to try to make something or someone of ourselves, especially through our actions—we enact our lives (Heidegger 1962). Hence Sartre elaborated existentialism as the view that “existence precedes essence,” that is, our projects, choices, successes and failures are what make us who we are or become (Sartre 1956).

Spiritual is not to be confused with religious. The spiritual is a dimension of experience, understanding, and action with a particular valuation that contributes to personal growth and well-being (this especially is distinct from the merely functional or pragmatic). Across the widely varying historical and geographical lifeworlds, the phenomenological sociology of values finds common features in the spiritual ethos that is in the structures of value experience. Spiritual values are manifest in phenomena for which people regularly choose to sacrifice the merely pleasurable, convenient, pleasant, or functional and thus cannot be reduced to the latter; thus the spiritual would include phenomena often identified culturally with truth and knowledge or even wisdom, right versus wrong, justice versus injustice, beauty versus ugliness, virtues versus vice (Scheler 1973).

On health, there is agreement that, in contrast to techno-science/bio-medicine’s dominant interpretation of health in terms of comparison to a statistical norm, health has to be understood in relation to the individual person or organism, which means in relation to their existential situation and projects in their lifeworld. Disease is a shrinkage or revision of self and world, until an equilibrium of a radically new sort can be achieved. “Disease is shock and danger for existence. Thus a definition of disease requires a conception of the individual nature as a starting point. Disease appears when an organism is changed in such a way that, though in its proper, ‘normal milieu’, it suffers catastrophic reaction” (Goldstein 2000, 329). Seen in parallel, “Being well means to be capable of ordered behavior which may prevail in spite of the impossibility of

certain performances which were formerly possible. But the new state of health is not the same as the old one. ... Recovery is a newly achieved state of ordered functioning... a new individual norm” (Goldstein 2000, 11). “To do this one has to consider each single symptom in terms of its functional significance for the total personality of the patient. Thus it is obviously necessary for the physician to know the organism as a whole, the total personality of the patient, and the change which this organism as a whole has suffered through disease. The whole organism, the individual human being, becomes the center of interest” (Goldstein 1963, 6).

Health can also be considered as related to risks. “A healthy organism comes together with its surrounding world in such a way as to be able to realize all of its capacities. The pathological state is the reduction of the initial latitude for intervening in the milieu” (Canguilhem 2012, 62). “The living body is thus the singular being whose health expresses the quality of the forces that constitute it: it must live with the tasks imposed on it, and it must live exposed to an environment that it does not initially choose. The living human body is the totality of the powers of a being that has the capacity to evaluate and represent itself to these powers, these exercises, and their limits. ... Bad health involves a shrinking of the margins of organic security, a limitation of the power to tolerate and compensate for the aggressions of the environment. ... Health, as the expression of the produced body, the body as product, is lived assurance—in the double sense of insurance against risk and the audacity to run the risk. It is the feeling of a capacity to surpass initial capacities, a capacity to make the body do what initially seemed beyond means” (Canguilhem 2012, 48-49).

Hence, the relation of a person in the world of everyday life and health can be thought in terms of “health as homelike being-in-the-world” (Svenaesus 2001, 90-93). “When we study our being-in-the-world at the level of meaning—the phenomenological level—it is, according to Heidegger, to be understood as nothing but a basic openness to the world which is structured as a ‘totality of relevance’” (Svenaesus 2001, 83). “What authentic anxiety makes evident is essentially the same phenomena that is brought to attention, not in healthy, but in ill forms of life—the not being at home in the world. Unhomelikeness which is ... a basic aspect of our existence; but there it is hidden by a dominating being at home in the world and is therefore covered up (cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 277).... Health is to be understood as a being-at-home that keeps the not being at

home in the world from becoming apparent” (Svenaeus 2001, 93) (also see Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness*).

The core phenomenology of home describes it as the starting and often striven for end point of human existence. From the initial home world into which we are born, we embark on a lifelong journey. To become a mature adult we need to leave home and encounter the other dimensions of alternate worlds; sometimes this happens naturally as one wants to leave home to grow into an independent adult; sometimes it is violently forced upon us by natural disasters, war, illness or other events that interrupt our taken for granted daily lives. The course of life, then, can be seen as an unending series of homecomings: leaving a home, encountering the strange or other, reacting to it (assimilating part of it, rejecting it, being overcome by it, and so on), and then continuing through further cycles.

Hence, ideas about health and well-being are understood as integrated with issues of belonging, place, and spirituality as in the applications in psychotherapy, such as that the possibilities and dynamics of the attempts at well-being can be approached through a framework of mobility—dwelling—and combined mobility—dwelling (Galvin and Todres 2013; Todres 2007).

1.5 Academic and social implications of this study

As discussed above, the major concerns in current Chinese society cover from basic human needs of food, spatial dislocation and social equality, to meaning-making and existential grounding. Mugerauer (2008) summarizes current major human problems under the umbrella of homelessness and uprootedness: “the existential problems of each individual person—how to live, how to face life’s challenges; massive refugee displacement, forced emigration-immigration around the world; technologies consuming and controlling life itself; ecological disasters on a global scale—the destruction of our home of homes” (2008, 542).

This study is closely tied to these issues: how confused and distressed individuals find solace and comfort in farming, how a grassroots community is formed and attracts rural residents to remain on their land instead of migrating to work in cities, and how this socio-ecological system benefits local resilience and sustainability. Whether, in this case, pieces of the ecosystem fall into place,

whether people in the community get connected and feel socially at home, and whether individuals find meaning and existential at-homeness, are the main issues that will be discussed in this study.

Chinese cities have taken a long path that is radically different from the Euro-American developed world. The unprecedented economic growth in China overshadows problems it caused, including the detriment of well-being on individual and social levels. The physiological and psychological health of people, and their sense of place and community are impacted but mostly ignored. This research is concerned with these phenomena and endeavors to investigate this village as a potential antidote. Based on current phenomenon of the lack of food safety and the withering of communities, this case has the potential to provide a positive example of agricultural recovery and growing up communities. Reconnecting to nature, people, and the self, this new phenomenon will provide an example of creating and managing therapeutic landscapes in a socially and ecologically sustainable way.

Informal urban agriculture (UA) as the main phenomenon that is studied in this research, is one livelihood strategy that the urban poor use in combination with other strategies in the western context. It has been defined in various ways over the years and across disciplines. Mougeot defines urban agriculture after a review of definitions commissioned by International Development Research Center (IDRC) (Quon, 1999): urban agriculture is an industry located within (intra-urban) or on the fringe (peri-urban) of a town, a city or a metropolis, which grows and raises, processes and distributes a diversity of food and non-food products, (re-)using largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplying human and material resources, products and services largely to that urban area (Mougeot 2000, 10). While it has been an influential topic, current research focuses more on the economic or material aspects of urban agriculture, for instance the function of producing food and income, and some discusses the environmental and social aspects (Mougeot 2005), while the psychological aspects are rarely mentioned.

Although most of the participants in the urban farming program in this case are better-off urban groups, they make use of periurban land to cope with their threatened food safety, social

connections and general well-being. Research on the relationship between gardening and healing landscapes has been investigated in the western context, but in China it is an emerging phenomenon and has been, heretofore, largely ignored. This research will explore the phenomena of organic farming and therapeutic landscapes, their elements and influence in the Chinese context, which will contribute to the general area of therapeutic landscapes study.

As the rapid urbanization in China threatens current existing space and changes the rural landscape dramatically, this research will document the phenomenon of gardening in a near-city rural area. Ningyuan Village is also under the pressure of redevelopment and urbanization, and most villagers have agreed to move and completely change their life style. In this sense, this research would be a useful historical record if the village were eliminated by development.

While phenomenological methods are broadly adopted in social science and humanities in academia in American contexts, they are rarely employed by Chinese scholars and largely overlooked by the discipline of China Studies. Research on space and place in China are relatively technical and shallow, while its counterpart in the western context is deeper and more theoretical. This research will promote the use of this research methodology in the Chinese context.

In sum, through the lens of a phenomenological investigation of therapeutic landscape experience, a clearer and deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese society, the rural and urban world, and potential healing strategies in and beyond this country will be provided in this study.

1.6 Situated researchers and field experience

Before diving into the starting point and processes of my research, it is necessary to give my positionality, as all researchers are situated in some way, and it is impossible to be absolutely objective. However it is more helpful to make my positions and probable limits clear, rather than pretending that I am completely objective with a view from nowhere.

I have been an urban dweller, brought up in a city, and had never spent time in a village more than one day when I conceived my research. My family has remote relatives from rural areas who sometimes come to visit, and receive material or monetary help from us. I barely talked to them during my childhood; I did, and still slightly do, have some not so positive impressions of rural people from my surrounding environment, taking them as poor, rustic, and uneducated to some extent. My visit to several different rural areas partly confirmed my impression but also made me aware that rural areas and people are more complex than just that.

However my first visit to Ningyuan Village convinced me that I needed to let go of my preconception about rural places and people. The core family in this research and some others in the village are a striking contrast. They might not have high academic degrees but are surprisingly articulate and have broad knowledge and experience of nature, the ecosystem, organic farming and permaculture. Their daytime is occupied with agricultural labor but they also spend some time at night reading philosophical works and classical literature. They might have concerns with their livelihood but do not conform to the stereotype of the petty, greedy peasant. They are clearly aware of the crisis we face—crisis of the society, of the ecosystem, and of the future of human beings. Their presence gave me more confidence in a positive vision of rural people and life. I decided that I wanted to explore this phenomenon more. We will meet each one of these inspiring figures in following chapters.

I had been a confused young seeker who suffered from “urban diseases” or more precisely existential homelessness for a long time during my time spent in China. The first twenty four years of my life were constant struggles with the outside world and an intensive negotiation with myself, trying to anchor myself and find the meaning of life beyond basic needs for survival. In this sense I am an insider of the blundering, competitive and isolated city life, so that I understand the need of people who share similar anxieties and aspirations. I have always wanted to find a way out for those who long for a more connected and meaningful life, and ultimately an existential home. Besides, my own life has not been a settled one. I left my hometown when I was fifteen for schools in different geographical areas in China, and the living experience in the US made me reflect on the concept of home and journey, homeless and at-homeness in a deeper manner. Philosophically I have been attracted to natural farming and permaculture, especially

their connection with eastern philosophies and the idea of *wuwei* and letting nature take its course (Fukuoka 1978). Knowing that this village closely follows this ideology to guide their everyday life, I decided to take it as my research site almost immediately.

As for rural farming life in practice, however, I am a complete outsider, not bearing the risk of insufficient harvest, the fluctuating price of produce, or the burden of hard agricultural work. Being an academic researcher, I am far enough from the rural setting to see its beauty, which also makes it possible to romanticize farming work to some extent. At the same time, I did spend a substantial amount of time in different villages after deciding on my research topic, immersing myself in the local environment and lifestyle of each, which made up for my ignorance and lack of experience of the rural context.

I am not a believer in materialism, which believes that nothing other than matter (such as consciousness) contributes to the reality of the world, and to some extent is the standard image of an objective researcher especially in the Chinese social context. Materialism, as the basis of Marxism, has been dominant in China's social, political and academic discourses, however, I used to be sympathetic with Buddhism and other eastern religions and now do not have a fondness for any institutionalized and over-interpreted religions but have an inclination to general spirituality. I tend to believe that there is something beyond the phenomena we perceive on the surface, some causal relationship that we do not understand yet, and some higher unseen forces that influence and give significance to human lives on this planet. As a result I look at nature and the ecosystem with awe, taking them as the source of life instead of resources. I have a high respect for local and traditional knowledge and lifestyle which are an accumulation of long-time experience instead of rational calculation derived from modern science, for instance traditional farming techniques represent experience in the local area for thousands of years, while "modern" farming in large scales is transplanted from western experiences in the last century.

Besides my position on religions, in social aspects I am a leftist who is aware of and sensitive to social inequality, in terms of resource and profits distribution, social status and hierarchy, and quality of life in general. This leads me to an attitude that tends to be suspicious of the neoliberal

free market, business that cares more about profits for the few than general human well-being, and the model of mass-producing goods including food and other agricultural products.

Lastly, I had been outside China for several years before I conceived the research and conducted the field work, which gives me the distance to reexamine the lifeworld with which I used to be familiar and to discover new things. I did not take things for granted as much as I did before, including social norms, political ideas, behavioral conventions, and even language choices and aesthetics. I am not a defender of the culture I am from to solidify my own identity, but my ego has been humbled over the years and is more open to uncertainty, challenges and fluctuation, which helps to suspend over-involvement toward the studied phenomena but could also be a cause of being overly-critical.

My first visit to Ningyuan Village was in July 2011. Having just finished a sultry and hustle-and-bustle week in Chengdu, the nearby metropolitan city, the first glance of this village was cooling, comforting, and serene, with greenness filling the eyesight. The sound of the consistent flowing water in the river meandering through the village was soothing with its natural rhythm. Bamboos lining along the entrance path into the village welcomed this group of visitors into a seemingly Peach Blossom Land.⁶ This group was composed of students in an international summer studio focusing on rural development and vernacular built environments in China. The first half of this studio was before this visit, which was spent in Southern Fujian Province in southeast China, studying sustainable use or reuse of a round building (*tulou*⁷). Like most rural villages, the one we stayed in lost most of its young residents to urban work and the round buildings were largely abandoned. Although the physical form of the village was kept, a sustainable livelihood was hard to continue or rediscover.

⁶ Peach Blossom Land was depicted in a 5th century piece of prose as a counterexample of the war-torn society by that time. It was an isolated place where people lived a peaceful, friendly, and affluent farming life. The term has become an idiom that is always associated with an imagined ideal world.

⁷ Round buildings historically served as the place for housing, dining, and gathering for communities, usually associated with each other by kinship. Because of its historic and aesthetic value from an architectural perspective, the area we worked with has been designated World Heritage by UNESCO. However as traditional extended family ties have been broken into core families, round buildings cannot serve the current social functions and a lot of them are abandoned now.

Ningyuan Village is different from most rural areas in China in this sense: farming is vibrant in the consistent “forest basin” (*Linpan*⁸ 林盘) landscape with both younger and older generations participating in it, instead of only the elderly who cannot work in the city. Opposite to the flow of people from the rural area to cities, this village is attracting people from surrounding urban areas to visit, stay and farm here. The family who received us represented a positive spirit with their ideology, work and life. They practice organic farming as a way to serve the land and the environment; it was an eye-opening experience for our group, as their knowledge of plants, the earth and the ecosystem and multiple permaculture techniques they use are totally new and intriguing for us. It was especially encouraging for me as a way to lead a moral life, living up to a land ethic (Leopold 1966), and getting healed from “urban diseases”. When we wrapped up the visit I felt renewed and the entire burden from the weather and the tiredness was relieved.

I have been interested in how people cope with blundering urban life in the everyday physical landscape. Tension in the whole society has been accumulating over the years of economic development and urbanization. As scholars point out, neoliberal ideas are integrated into this once-socialist society, passing the burden of social welfare, job security and personal success to individuals, an illusion of freedom (Anagnost 2013). As a result, frustration, anxiety and fear are observed: mass violence against weak groups is frequently seen, and the feeling of desperation, insecurity and helplessness is prevalent—food security, job security, social relationship security and security for the future all need to be addressed. In this dim context, this village looked promising as a counter-example for my research. It was also down-to-earth and practical, producing healthy food and human relationships as an antidote to the outside world.

In addition to this case that provides healthy physical food, I had another site in my mind that was supposed to represent mental and spiritual food. Mount Emei, in the same geographic area, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Chengdu, became, for early Chinese followers of Buddhism, the home of *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva*—in Chinese *Puxian*—and as such became a major pilgrimage site as perhaps the greatest of the Four Buddhist Mountains in China. Poets,

⁸ This particular kind of settlement pattern and landscape exclusively exists in this area, and will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

intellectuals, elites, government officials, and ordinary people took pilgrimage up the 3,099-meter-high mountain to get healed and liberated until recently (Hargett 2006). Modern Chinese history witnessed drastic changes in social and spiritual life, and physical space was not an exception. Similar to many tourist sites in China that are their locale's main economic catalysts, (Ryan and Gu 2009), Mount Emei is also promoted by its local government vigorously, a phenomenon juxtaposed with the pilgrimage landscape. Although Buddhist and Taoist pilgrimages have been practiced there for more than a thousand years (Hargett 2006), they were wiped out during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). After the political turmoil, reviving pilgrimage was practiced on a yearly basis, primarily by local rural females for peace and health (Ehrlich 1997). The past several years witnessed the resurrection of religions and spirituality in China after the Cultural Revolution. My speculation for this phenomenon is that industrialized urban stress has contributed to an increase in spiritual activities to provide people meaningful peace, and senses of continuity and community lost in cities.

Geographically Mt. Emei is in the same area as Ningyuan Village, located on the edge of Sichuan Basin (Figure 2). With similar social and cultural backgrounds, the two cases were considered comparable and mutually complementary by me: both of them are close to the metropolitan city of Chengdu, and look promising as therapeutic landscapes. Comparing the two sites with each other, Ningyuan Village is smaller in scale, growing physical food and gathering people together as a supportive community, while Mount Emei attracts a much larger number of tourists and pilgrimages, providing opportunities of physical exercise or exhaustion and spiritual elevation at the same time.⁹ Ningyuan Village is a humanly modified agricultural landscape, while Mount Emei integrates spectacular natural and cultural views as one of the World Heritage sites listed by UNESCO.

⁹ It takes two to three days to climb up the mountain on foot. Also see following paragraphs for more details.

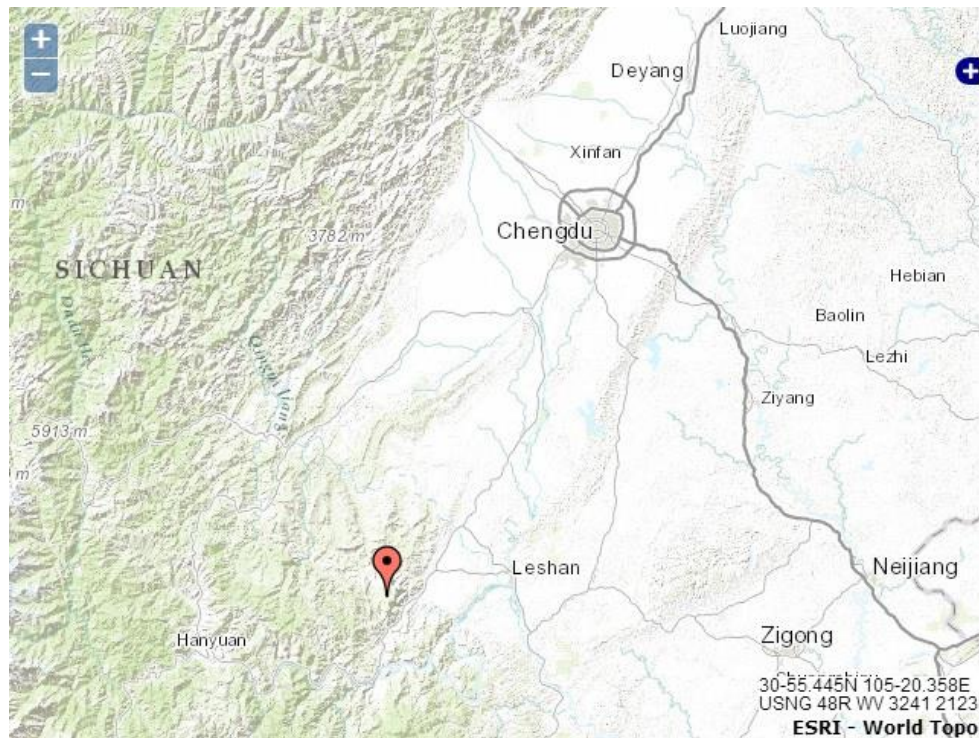


Figure 2. Locations of Mount Emei and the city of Chengdu. The marker shows Mount Emei. (Map from USGS Maps.)

With these thoughts, I visited Mount Emei shortly after my trip to Ningyuan Village and the process was not therapeutic but instead slightly traumatic. The mountain was crowded with tourists from nearby cities, primarily Chengdu. They didn't have time to really see or experience the landscape but had to finish the visit during less than two days to fit their schedule into a weekend; I saw groups of tourists scurrying about with a group with a tour guide leading ahead and talking with a loud speaker. Buddhist temples serve as commercial centers, selling trinkets, souvenirs, and religious articles. Numerous tourists groups occupied the mountain and a quiet peaceful religious soundscape was completely turned into one that is like a cacophonous entertainment place. Tourists who travel as individuals were overshadowed by tour groups, not to mention pilgrims. I did see a handful of pilgrims, aged and lonely, traveling quietly with their bamboo sticks in a sharp contrast with young and boisterous tour groups who traveled in cars.

People who engaged in catering told me that they used to be farmers growing tea and rice locally, but were evicted when the mountain was appointed as a tourism center and tourism was

designated as the pillar of local economy. “A ticket’s price was raised from two RMB thirty years ago to one hundred and fifty now, and most pilgrims cannot afford it and they just don’t come anymore.” Mr. Xi told me. He talked to me for an hour for the purpose of convincing me to take his sedan chair, which was carried by two men travelling up and down on the steep mountain path. I felt bad for them but resisted taking it as it seemed to me not a service provided from an equal position but more an exploitation of them. The invisible disparity in the social landscape struck me in a way that I did not expect, that to me the once romanticized spiritual landscape turned into a fragmented heterotopia for different actors and spectators.

In the physical aspect, the internal and external stimulation was not less than that in the urban area of Chengdu, or was even more intense, with noise, speed, and a disturbed vibration of energy. Moreover, new construction has been built to attract more tourists to meet their diverse expectations: an ice and snow pleasure garden, mountain train ride, tea tasting, flower peeking, and hot spring baths (Wu 2001). The landscape is commercialized to a substantial extent and has changed physically and mentally.

In sum, the visit to Mount Emei presented a negative view of contemporary middle-class tourism despoiling the local landscape, of economic “development” and social justice. So I decided to change the idea of physical and spiritual healing landscapes, instead to compare two cases, assuming that experiences in a modest rural farm and in a commercialized tourism center are different from the perspective of therapeutic landscapes. I planned to investigate experiences in these two sites and people’s feelings of their general well-being there. Assuming that people have contrasting experiences in these two sites, I wanted to explore how physical characters, including natural and built, social contexts, and symbolic meanings (Curtis 2010; Gesler 1993; Williams 2008) of landscapes contribute to people’s experience. I was curious of the differences between the biological diversity and rich cultural heritage and meaning of Mount Emei and the rural setting with cultivated plants and relatively simple social environment in Ningyuan Village. I also wanted to investigate other elements that influence people’s experience of landscapes, for instance joining different groups or traveling individually, traveling patterns, motivations, expectation and so forth. And I was especially interested in the role of bodily hardship of pilgrims in the possibility of being mentally healed, as opposed to the more pleasant travel of a

tourist, as well as people's perspective of the landscape engaging in heavy work in a farm with bodily movement, as opposed to the sedentary intellectual work in the city. Ultimately I would like to articulate implications for tourism and therapeutic landscapes in contemporary China.

I did the majority of the field work in two sites from April to June 2012. I stayed with the Chen family, which is the core of organic farming practice in Ningyuan Village. I experienced a real everyday rural life, participating in farming activities: sowing, watering, harvesting, cooking, feeding dogs, and so on. Being a person who was brought up in cities, I observed the world in a way that I have never experienced before: no Internet most of the time, quiet and dark nights with frogs croaking, noticing sunrise and sunset at shifting times every day, observing the change of seasons and foods on the table varying with time, etc. It was at first a self-educating and transformative experience for me as a researcher.

I worked with local farmers from the village and talked to them, mostly with members of the family; I also talked to "urban farmers" who rent a plot of land from the family and do farming on weekends. I met volunteers with different political views but with the same goal of improving the rural condition and the whole society. Environmental NGOs are a big part of involvement here; they organize education programs, arrange for the sale of vegetables and herbs in cities, and introduce visitors and new urban farmers. Agricultural experts come to learn their experience in the aim of improving agriculture and rural life elsewhere in this country. Elementary and middle schools nearby arrange visits and curriculum around this village, communicating knowledge of nature and the practice of real life. Visitors are not limited to domestic people; a spectrum of international visitors have different interests and purposes: community service, rural development, learning Mandarin, consuming safe vegetables, and so on. I found this context much richer and promising than I imagined before the field work.

The field work in Mount Emei, however, was not so encouraging. My planned phenomenological interview was not really applicable for members of tourist groups, who were either in a rush on their trip, or competing with other tourists for views, cable cars, and advantageous view spots for taking photos. Individual travelers were more accessible on narrow stone stairways to the mountain summit, which is a hard path to travel for almost everybody. It

seemed that physical difficulties robbed them of the ability to reflect on their experiences and closed them up from the sensitivity of other feelings. Most of them could only talk about how tired they were; it was hardly possible to explore deeply their experiences of the landscape, and I did not see the assumed therapeutic features overtly engaging people.

After this phase of field work I decided to focus on the case of Ningyuan Village, using both phenomenological observation and interviews, specifically the idea a critical dialogue by Paulo Freire (1970; 1992) to explore people's experiences of the landscape, their ideas and feelings of farming, motivations, expectations, and concerns. Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Ernstson and Sholin 2009; Latour 2007; Thrift 1999) was also used to discover complex individual and group involvement in the village, how they interact, influence, and inspire each other, and the establishment of a grassroot community from bottom up. The role of nature and other objects play an important part in this community too, which is another contribution of ANT. This topic is more contemporary, relevant and inspiring in several aspects.

1.7 Chapters

With background information provided in this chapter, the following chapters are organized to present the findings of this research. Chapter 2 outlines current municipal policies concerning urbanization and human well-being, and points out the gap between governmental and grassroots efforts on improving citizens' quality of life. Chapter 3 depicts an image of the site, where this research was carried out, its physical features and social contexts. Chapter 4 delves into the main part of the studied phenomenon, exploring what individuals' experience is in this landscape, and whether and how it is therapeutic or beneficial to their well-being. Chapter 5 discusses the bottom-up forming process of this community, how it is established, what the relationships among different participants are, and possible implications for other communities. Chapter 6 relates observed phenomena to theory, and tries to prove, support, and also challenge existing theories that are relevant to this research. Chapter 7 summarizes the findings of this research and discusses possible weaknesses and potentials.

Chapter 2 Current Policies and the Overlook on the Health Aspect

“To improve quality of life and to promote urban and rural residents’ well-being, we should at first advance employment, second refine the social security system, and third vigorously develop education and medical infrastructure...”

– Municipal Government of Chengdu¹⁰

“Primarily I think it’s safe to eat [vegetables grown here]. My family usually doesn’t buy vegetables [in the market]; but when we do, every time I wonder how many chemicals are used [to grow them].”

– An urban farmer in Chengdu¹¹

“Oh please don’t talk to me... I’m not worth talking to. I’m only a migrant worker on weekdays and farm here on weekends. I’m not well educated and you are an intellectual person; we are not like them (pointing to other people in the field with his chin); we are not good at talking...there is no good in us.”

– An employed farmer in Chengdu¹²

I met this young man in my research field, Ningyuan, a periurban village close to Chengdu, Sichuan. As disclosed in his narrative, he is a rural person working in the city as his main job and is also hired by someone to farm there during weekends, while other “urban farmers” went there on weekends to relieve themselves from their everyday city life. He clearly distinguished himself

¹⁰ Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “2013nian chengdushi zhengfu gongzuo baogao” 2013 年成都市政府工作报告 [Chengdu Municipal Government Work Report for 2013], http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=770975. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aN3EZoVj>)

¹¹ Interview with an “urban farmer” in periurban Chengdu, May 2012. “Urban farmers” are from the urban area and grow food for themselves in this periurban village.

¹² Interview with a hired “urban farmer” in periurban Chengdu, May 2012.

from urban people as he is not like, or more precisely, he felt not so worthy as “them.” This sad phenomenon of low self-esteem, which I think is common for most rural people, is a reflection of the social disparity between urban and rural sectors in contemporary China. The disparity is both physical and social, spatial and personal: urban and rural areas enjoy different benefits; at the same time urban and rural residents are treated differently even in the same place, although the city is physically open to migrant workers from rural areas.

The first two quotes represent different ideas of well-being from the government’s perspective and an ordinary citizen’s. As illustrated in the two quotes, this chapter discusses governmental and alternative grassroots efforts in integrating rural and urban sectors of Chengdu Prefecture in the context of rapid urbanization in China, especially the policy-making aspect of this process, in the aim of improving quality of life and constructing livable places. Chengdu is a pilot case for national reform of land and social-economic policies relating to urban-rural integration (Ye and LeGates 2013), and as described above, inequality between urban and rural residents is the focus of these policies, which aim to promote balanced development and human well-being for both areas. Critiquing governmental programs, this study will investigate this example of natural farming on the grassroots level, focusing on its measures for ecological protection and community building. Following this overview of an alternative approach to urbanization and well-being of individuals and communities, next chapters will explore this approach with more details and depth.

In the past decade, the municipal government of Chengdu has made a series of policies, aiming to improve the quality of life and social harmony in its precinct. Human well-being for both urban and rural residents is a focus of the Chengdu experiment,¹³ and a commonly accepted definition of it includes several requisite elements: 1) Necessary material standards for a good life, including secure and adequate livelihoods, income and assets, enough food at all times, shelter, furniture, clothing, and access to goods; 2) Physical health, requiring a salubrious

¹³ “Chengdushi guominjingji he shehuifazhan dishi’ergewunian guihua gangyao” 成都市国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要 [Chengdu, Economic and Social Development of the Twelfth Five Years of Planning Guidelines], <http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/02115001/201554144137.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDCwhGO>)

physical environment to insure proper bodily processes and vigor; 3) Good social relations, including social cohesion, mutual respect, balanced gender and family relations, and the ability to help others and provide for children; 4) Security, including safety of person and possessions, unimpeded access to natural and other resources, and resiliency from natural and human-made disasters; and 5) Personal freedom and choice, including some control over what happens and being able to achieve what a person values doing or being (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003, 74).

Although the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) definition of health or well-being is criticized by scholars (Parkes 2006; Yang et.al 2013), it is a relatively comprehensive and specific approach to understanding human health and well-being. In contrast, the municipal government of Chengdu listed medical care infrastructure, average life expectancy, disposable income per capita, unemployment rate, endowment insurance, medical care insurance, and energy consumption and pollution control for living environment as their criteria for well-being or quality of life, which is one of the main goals for the twelfth five years' government work (2011-2015).¹⁴

The next section of this chapter will describe and analyze the main policies that have been made and carried out in Chengdu and how they have or have not produced effects in turning the prefecture into a more healthy and humane place to live. I argue that these policies lack a human perspective of individual and community well-being, especially the psychological element, and could be improved in various aspects.

2.1 Chengdu as a Case of Rapid Urbanization in China

Cities in developing countries have experienced urbanization in different ways than those countries that industrialized earlier. And Chinese cities have a long and distinct historical trajectory with unprecedented pace of urbanization (Friedmann 2005) in the current context. The

¹⁴ “Chengdushi guominjingji he shehuifazhan dishi’ergewunian guihua gangyao” 成都市国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要 [Chengdu, economic and social development of the twelfth five years of planning guidelines], <http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/02115001/201554144137.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDCwhGO>)

earliest urban settlements in China dated back to 17th century BCE (Friedmann 2005), and the capital city of the Tang Dynasty (8th-10th century CE), Chang'an, already had a population of over a million (Friedmann 2005). Since the establishment of the regime of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chinese society has witnessed dramatic urbanization, with an urban population of 10.1% in 1949 to 49.68% in 2010, which means that currently about half of Chinese population live in cities.¹⁵ During this period of time, a series of fundamental social and economic shifts complicated the urbanization process, including the transformation from centrally-planned to market economy, the continuing *hukou* system (Chan and Zhang 1999) that fixes people's residency to where they are officially registered, and the land property system that assigned the controlling power of distributing land rights and influencing population migration to the government, among other policies that cannot be fully listed here (Friedmann 2005). In this general national landscape, Chengdu has a distinct historical and social context with a relatively isolated geographic location, which makes it different from cities in other parts of China in many ways: ethnic diversity, a less competitive pace of economic development, a relatively liberal political atmosphere and a fertile piece of land for NGOs, a deeper environmental awareness and activism, to name a few. All of these elements make Chengdu a unique but valuable case of how different actors are consciously pursuing healthy and humane placemaking in the face of stressfully rapid urbanization.

Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan Province, located in southwest China. The population is over 14,000,000 according to 2010 national census,¹⁶ with an area of 12,121 square kilometers for the whole prefecture, including both urban and rural sectors.¹⁷ Chengdu has been the

¹⁵ "Guojia tongjiju 2010 nian diliuci quanguo renkou pucha zhuyao shuju gongbao (di 1 hao)" 国家统计局 2010 年第六次全国人口普查主要数据公报 (第 1 号) [Public Report on the Main Data of the Sixth National Census (No. 1) by National Statistical Bureau], http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj./tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428_30327.html. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDNSHRv>)

¹⁶ Statistical Bureau of Sichuan 四川省统计局, "Sichuansheng 2010nian diliuci quanguorenkou pucha zhuyao shuju gongbao (diyihao)" 四川省 2010 年第六次全国人口普查主要数据公报 (第 1 号) [Public Report on the Main Data of the Sixth National Census in Sichuan (No. 1)]. http://www.sc.stats.gov.cn/sjfb/tjgb/201206/t20120607_2560.html. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDbYVHF>)

¹⁷ Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府, "2011 Chengdu tongji nianjian" 2011 成都统计年鉴 [2011 Statistics Yearbook of Chengdu]. <http://www.cdstats.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/020703/%E7%BB%BC%E5%90%88.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDhVWdG>)

political, economic, military and cultural center of Sichuan province and the entire southwest part of China since Song and Yuan Dynasties (about 10th-14th century).¹⁸ Now it is one of the biggest metropolitan cities in southwest China and the gateway to Tibet, which brought great numbers of international visitors and diversity to the city.

In terms of natural and geographical features, Chengdu boasts extremely productive land partly owing to the magnificent hydrological project Dujiangyan northwest to the city (Abramson and Qi 2011), which nurtured a densely populated area but also brought the challenge for urbanization in the contemporary context.

China has witnessed unprecedented rapid urbanization since the reform in 1978 (Carrillo 2011; Ding 2012; Friedmann 2005; McGee 2007), and the new administration that came into office in 2012 takes urbanization as one of the main tasks of the central government, identifying urbanization as the biggest catalyst for economic growth.¹⁹ Similar to a lot of Chinese cities, the expansion of Chengdu has been rapid, with the urbanization rate increased by 4% in five years (Table 1) and agricultural population turned into non-agricultural population in a dramatic pace (Table 2).

¹⁸Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府, “Chengdu lishi yan’ge” 成都历史沿革 [The History of Chengdu]. http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=273934. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDmm519>)

¹⁹Hexun News, “Political Bureau of the Central Committee: Positive Economic Factors Increased; Urbanization Is the Focus of the Task for the Coming Year”, December 5, 2012. http://news.hexun.com/2012-12-05/148693531_1.html. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNEnJ9Q4>)

Hexun News, “Li Keqiang: Urbanization Is the Biggest Development Potential in the Future”, November 30, 2012, <http://house.hexun.com/2012-11-30/148558346.html>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNFR7bLU>)

Fenghuang News, “Li Keqiang: Urbanization Is the Biggest Potential for Domestic Demands”, December 14, 2013, <http://city.ifeng.com/cskx/20131214/402582.shtml>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNGNWVvG>)

Table 1. Urbanization rate in Chengdu from 2006-2010.²⁰

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Urbanization rate (%)	61.53	62.58	63.58	64.85	65.51

Table 2. Income per capita in urban and rural Chengdu.²¹

Population composition (%)	1978	1980	1990	2000	2009	2010
Agricultural	77.7	76.7	72.7	65.9	44.8	43.4
Non-agricultural	22.3	23.3	27.3	34.1	55.2	56.6

Sichuan's reconstruction after the 2008 earthquake²² triggered radical urbanization and transformation of rural land in the province, in the name of urban-rural integration (Abramson and Qi 2011), based on the urban-rural dual system in China, which resulted in injustice in multiple aspects, influencing individual social, economic, and physical well-being; these inequities included preferential employment, housing, social welfare, healthcare and education policies, and controls of freedom of movement (Chan 1996; Chan and Zhang 1999).

The PRC has a history of sacrificing the rural sector for urban development (1952-1978) and paying more attention to urban development while restraining the rural area (1978-2010) (Carrillo 2011; Chan 1996; Chan and Zhang 1999) in various ways, prioritizing urban industrial development over the rural agricultural sector (Lin 1994), limiting mobility especially from rural to urban areas, and providing job opportunities, social services and other benefits in cities while not in rural areas (Chan 1996; Chan and Zhang 1999). According to the economic yearbook of the Chengdu municipal government, in 2009 income of urban residents per capita was 18,659

²⁰Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府, "2011 Chengdu tongji nianjian" 2011 成都统计年鉴 [2011 Statistics Yearbook of Chengdu]. <http://www.cdstats.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/020703/%E7%BB%BC%E5%90%88.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDhVWdG>)

²¹Ibid.

²² The earthquake happened on May 12, 2008 and left over 80,000 casualty. The magnitude was about 8.0 in Richter scale and the epicenter was only 79 kilometers away from Chengdu. The reconstruction after the earthquake triggered heated debate in public and mass media, and the governmental actions were widely questioned for its suspicious equity and efficiency.

RMB while the rural data was 7,129 RMB; in 2010 the urban income was 20835 RMB and its rural counterpart was 8,205 RMB.²³

Urban-rural disparity has existed in China ever since 1949 when the current government came into power. It exists in different aspects of life. With the *hukou* (household registration) system (Chan 1996), people can only enjoy certain public service and resources in the area where they are registered, for instance education, healthcare, and so on, which greatly limits the possibility of rural residents moving to the city, working and making a living there. One of the most important classifications in this system is distinguishing rural and urban *hukou*. As most resources and public infrastructure are available in urban areas rather than in the rural sector, the *hukou* system benefits urban residents more and, at the same time, discriminates against rural people in a significant way.

Similarly, the “New China” government has set the policy to give more support to industrial development in cities in order to catch up with or surpass developed Western countries deemed a political threat (Lin 1994). One of the ways to achieve this goal is to sacrifice food, capital and social services for the rural, agricultural sector. The majority of death during the famine of 1959-1962 was from the country because resource distribution policies favored and protected urban areas and their ruling elites. Central control of agricultural production kept prices low in cities to benefit the industrial sector; a 1978 change in land use policy that enabled farmers to take greater control of their own assigned land provided some incentive to improve agricultural production and rural life. Some scholars of rural issues pointed out, however, that the “three rural crisis” remained bad: “The peasants’ lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis.” (Day 2008). In sum, conditions in rural areas are still impoverished and backward, despite the 1978 reforms.

The income difference is a major incentive for rural residents to leave agricultural life and make a living in the city. Similar to a lot of Chinese cities, a large part of the urbanization rate of

²³ Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府, “2011 Chengdu tongji nianjian” 2011 成都统计年鉴 [2011 Statistics Yearbook of Chengdu]. <http://www.cdstats.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/020703/%E7%BB%BC%E5%90%88.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNDhVWdG>)

Chengdu is composed by the so-called “amphibious population” (Ye and LeGates 2013), also called rural migrant workers, who are from the rural area but work in cities, usually doing physical work with relatively low payment and minimal public welfare benefits. In 2012, the population living in Chengdu was 14.18 million, among whom only 11.73 million were registered residents, which means that amphibious population accounted for 16.5% of the total.²⁴ One of the factors that limits free population movement and has contributed to multiple urban-rural disparities is the *hukou* (household registration) system, which is an important tool of the state to monitor and control population mobility, food prices and wages, and to guide social welfare expenditures. *Hukou* creates a clear-cut urban-rural dual structure, preventing either sector from enjoying the education, healthcare, social welfare benefits of the other (Chan and Zhang 1999). It has prevented real improvement of living standards in fast-growing cities; the amphibious population is physically present in cities, contributing to growing urban economies, but does not share proportionately in the higher-quality, better-equipped public service facilities and infrastructure offered there (Ye and LeGates 2013, 53). In the fifty years’ history of *hukou* system, scholars and policy makers have realized its profound influence on various aspects of individuals’ life (Chan and Zhang 1999), and one major component of Chengdu’s effort is devoted to *hukou* system reform to make both rural and urban sectors of the prefecture more healthy, livable and humane.

2.2 Policy making effort to coordinate urban and rural development in Chengdu

The reform or experiment of Chengdu has been made under two main policy names: “New Socialist Countryside Construction” and “urban-rural coordinated development,” which aim to improve rural life and coordinate urban and rural development.

²⁴ Statistical Bureau of Chengdu 成都市统计局. “2012nian Chengdushi guominjingji he shehuifazhan tongjigongbao” 2012年成都市国民经济和社会发展统计公报 [2012 Public Report on Economic and Social Development of Chengdu Prefecture], April 18, 2013, <http://www.cdstats.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/020705/2012%E5%B9%B4%E6%88%90%E9%83%BD%E5%B8%82%E5%9B%BD%E6%B0%91%E7%BB%8F%E6%B5%8E%E5%92%8C%E7%A4%BE%E4%BC%9A%E5%8F%91%E5%B1%95%E7%BB%9F%E8%AE%A1%E5%85%AC%E6%8A%A5.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNGVvYqZ>)

Decades of deprivation have embedded in the rural population psychological feelings of inferiority and exclusion. As a result, it is not surprising that the rural population yearns to improve their life as those have in urban areas. After Deng Xiaoping's reform in 1978, urbanization became the new interest of public policy, but it has not improved the rural sector's low self-esteem, lagging material wealth, and relatively low quality of life.

Getting rural people into the cities has assisted central government goals to improve domestic economic consumption, and to avoid relying solely on exports.²⁵ The new premier set urbanization and improving quality of life as one of the main goals during his tenure.²⁶

Urbanization has occurred in a rapid manner and has been successful in terms of its speed: In 2011 alone, China's urban population increased by 21 million and, on January 17, 2012, the Chinese government announced that urban population surpassed rural population; out of the total population of 1.35 billion, the urban sector claims 0.69 billion, 51.27% of the total. As we have indicated, however, a large part of the newly increased urban population is rural migrant workers who don't enjoy the city's social welfare benefits and feel dissatisfied with their situation. Violent events have been reported as a result.²⁷

²⁵ “Zhongguo chengshihua buyi caozhiguoji” 中国城市化不宜操之过急 [Urbanization in China should not be hurried]. *Deutsche Welle Chinese Version*, October 3, 2013, http://www.dw.de/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%9F%8E%E5%B8%82%E5%8C%96%E4%B8%8D%E5%AE%9C%E6%93%8D%E4%B9%8B%E8%BF%87%E6%80%A5/a-16662324?maca=chi-rss-chi-all-1127-rdf&utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNGjNX82>)

²⁶ Hexun News, “Li Keqiang: Urbanization Is the Biggest Development Potential in the Future”, November 30, 2012, <http://house.hexun.com/2012-11-30/148558346.html>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNFR7bLU>)

Fenghuang News, “Li Keqiang: Urbanization Is the Biggest Potential for Domestic Demands”, December 14, 2013, <http://city.ifeng.com/cskx/20131214/402582.shtml>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNGNWVvG>)

²⁷ “Zhongguo chengzhen renkou shouci chaoguo xiangcun” 中国城镇人口首次超过乡村 [Urban population in China surpassed rural population for the first time]. *Deutsche Welle Chinese Version*, January 18, 2012, <http://www.dw.de/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%9F%8E%E9%95%87%E4%BA%BA%E5%8F%A3%E9%A6%96%E6%AC%A1%E8%B6%85%E8%BF%87%E4%B9%A1%E6%9D%91/a-15671056>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNHdWE6L>)

The Central party and government promulgated the New Socialist Countryside Construction in 2005, a political platform aimed at "...developing production, improving rural income, promoting rural civilization and physical appearance, and promoting democratic rural administration."²⁸ Since the beginning of this century, officials and scholars have been discussing the "three rural problems" as mentioned earlier in this chapter, that peasants, agriculture, and the rural sector generally are suffering and facing crisis (Day 2008). Despite the seemingly holistic approach written in policy documents, critics of the program pointed out that when implemented, this movement is primarily an effort to increase infrastructure and other capital investment to boost GDP, stimulate domestic demand for industrial products, and to maintain the rate of economic development, as suggested by the former Vice President of the World Bank, economist Justin Yi-fu Lin.²⁹ Simple economic indicators such as GDP can hardly reflect the comprehensive picture of human well-being, therefore it is questionable if the purpose of improving rural life quality can be achieved by pursuing such indicators alone.

In concert with the New Socialist Countryside Construction, the municipal government of Chengdu presented its "three concentrations" policies in its Urban-Rural Coordinated Development plan. These called for concentrating industry to create "development zones" or "strategic function zones;" concentrating peasants in denser rural communities; and concentrating agricultural land into more productive-per-kilometer enterprises and simultaneously encouraging large-scale farming and the formation of new, rural, corporate enterprises. Through these policies, by 2012 the government had built 1,591 new concentrated village communities³⁰ increasing agricultural land in large-scale management to 3,050,000 *mu*.³¹

²⁸Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. "Zhonggongzhongyang guanyu zhiding guominjingji he shehuifazhan dishiyige wunianjihua de jianyi" 中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十一个五年规划的建议 [Suggestions on Making the Eleventh Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development]. October 11, 2005, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2005-10/18/content_3640318.htm.

²⁹ Wen, workshop in University of Washington, April 2013, Seattle.

³⁰Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. "Zhengfu gongzuo baogao: 2012nian chengxiangyitihuafazhan quanmian jiakuai" 政府工作报告: 2012年城乡一体化发展全面加快 [Government Report: Urban-Rural Integration Has Sped Up in All Aspects in 2012]. March 8, 2013, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=746804. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNI3YrhO>)

³¹ 1 *mu*=666.67 square meters. 15 *mu*=1 hectare.

Eighty per cent of agricultural households were involved in industrialized agriculture.³² These were considered achievements in the government yearly report for 2012.³³ In 2013, a new policy was implemented to encourage large-scale production of rice, and to build and improve 340 concentrated “new rural complexes”³⁴ of mixed housing and productive facilities by the end of 2014.³⁵

Some scholars give credit to the incentives included in these policies. By concentrating agricultural land and promoting modern, industrial-scale farming, more agricultural produce can be produced with fewer farm laborers and industrial jobs are provided to extra laborers (Ye and LeGates 2013, 10). Building concentrated rural communities is considered “both physically in the form of attractive new rural villages and, socially, through services and institutions that make it possible for farmers and former farmers to enjoy many of the advantages of urban life while continuing to live in the countryside.” In this sense, “Chengdu is modernizing the countryside in a phased way to ensure that former farmers really benefit from development.” (Ye and LeGates 2013, 10)

Another element of Chengdu’s Urban-Rural Coordinated Development plan calls for the development of “six integrations:” first, the integration of urban and rural planning by promoting new uniform guidelines of countryside planning and construction. Second, integrating urban and rural industries. Third, integrating urban and rural markets and improving rural financial and

³² Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao: 2012nian chengxiangyitihuafazhan quanmian jiakuai” 政府工作报告: 2012年城乡一体化发展全面加快 [Government Report: Urban-Rural Integration Has Sped Up in All Aspects in 2012]. March 8, 2013, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=746804. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNI3YrhO>)

³³Ibid.

³⁴“New Rural Complex” is a new type of rural community that integrates housing, industrial development, infrastructure, public service in a concentrated way. Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “2013nian chengdushi zhengfu gongzuo baogao” 2013年成都市政府工作报告 [Municipal Government of Chengdu Annual Report for 2013]. January 17, 2014, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=770975. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aN3EzVj>)

³⁵ Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “2013nian chengdushi zhengfu gongzuo baogao” 2013年成都市政府工作报告 [Municipal Government of Chengdu Annual Report for 2013]. January 17, 2014, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=770975. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aN3EzVj>)

investment system. Fourth, integrating urban and rural infrastructure especially landline, internet and mobile phone networks. Fifth, integrating urban and rural public services, including rural daycare services, healthcare service centers in rural communities, rural cultural centers, rural elderly homes, local police stations, local legal service centers and so on, and unifying the system of elderly care, healthcare, and minimal subsistence allowances (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*). Sixth, integrating urban and rural administration, extending governmental service to local communities to cover all urban and rural areas.³⁶

Consistent with the core concern of Socialist New Countryside Construction, infrastructure construction is one of the key issues in this policy package. “Integrated land management” with other infrastructure transformation of roads, water and forests is emphasized in the document.³⁷

As discussed above, the *hukou* system adversely influences the rural dweller’s life in various aspects and, to ameliorate this, the Chengdu government pays special attention to it with new policies. According to Ye and LeGates, Chengdu tries to unify the *hukou* system, eliminating the dual categories of urban and rural *hukou* and implementing resident *hukou* within the prefecture, with the purpose of equalizing social service benefits to rural residents (Ye and LeGates 2013, 10).

Concerning individual well-being, Chengdu’s policies focus on improving rural health infrastructure and facilities. To equalize public health care, it has called for the creation of new health facilities and programs; it has set the goal of building standardized public health centers, village clinics and community service stations so that urban residents can reach some form of service within 10-15 minutes by foot and rural residents within 30 minutes by vehicle (Ye and

³⁶Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao: 2012nian chengxiangyitihuafazhan quanmian jiakuai” 政府工作报告：2012年城乡一体化发展全面加快 [Government Report: Urban-Rural Integration Has Sped Up in All Aspects in 2012]. March 8, 2013, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=746804. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNI3YrhO>)

³⁷Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao: 2012nian chengxiangyitihuafazhan quanmian jiakuai” 政府工作报告：2012年城乡一体化发展全面加快 [Government Report: Urban-Rural Integration Has Sped Up in All Aspects in 2012]. March 8, 2013, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=746804. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNI3YrhO>)

LeGates 2013, 150-151). In terms of administrative reform, a county-township dual-level administrative system for public health is being developed, and most of the rural public health administration work has been decentralized from the county level down to town and township hospitals. Urban public health services in six areas have been extended to rural areas: protection against disease, health care, health recovery, health education, family planning, and basic medical care. Increasing financial subsidies for public health in rural areas, a regional public health plan, and a health resources allocation plan guide public health reforms (156); public health information system, including personal records is established (157); integrated health insurance system are planned to be built (160).

Although some scholars consider Chengdu's planning reform as positive and effective in many ways, that it can boost domestic demand by transforming the amphibious population into urban residents and establishing a more complete social security system, and education and training can accumulate human capital and increase industrial efficiency and overall economic performance (Ye and LeGates 2013, 61), it can be seen that most of this concern relates to economic development. But whether quality of life and people's well-being have benefited from these policies needs more careful scrutiny. Empirical studies on micro levels are needed to ascertain if policies are implemented as written and aimed for.

2.3 Urgent issues on human well-being in urban areas

“Behind the ‘Chinese miracle’ we find a condensation of the novels of Dickens and of Balzac, tales of the new poor and the new bourgeoisie. Ecological disasters affect the lives of 560 million city dwellers, of which only 1 per cent breathe air that is considered healthy by the standards of the European Union. Nine thousand chemical factories cause unbearable pollution more than the mines of Yang Tse alone...In the health domain, a sick person who goes into hospital is first interrogated about his financial resources (Cohen and Emanuel 2014, 64).

The rural sector is in a disadvantaged position in terms of overall health and well-being and the policies aim to decrease the imbalance between rural and urban sectors; urban residents, however, have different, but not easier, issues regarding their health and overall well-being.

Causes of inferior health are growing in urban China, including physical health and psychological health, as well as community well-being. With economic development, concerns of environmental deterioration and the resulting health issues have been spreading and resulted in public concern. In 2013, over 600 million people suffered from hazy weather that resulted from atmospheric pollutants, which has proved to cause diseases of respiratory system, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases and so on. Certain data shows that death increases during hazy weather too³⁸. Polluted water discharge, along the Huai River, for example, cost many years and numerous resources to solve but didn't actually improve.³⁹ The dead pigs found in upper Huangpu River in March 2013 caused serious concern and turned into a public event discussed nationally.⁴⁰ Other environmental health events include soil pollution and resulting agricultural risk; in 2012 57% of groundwater monitoring points report inferior or extremely polluted water quality over the country;⁴¹ cancer and other serious diseases concentrate in certain areas.⁴² Some experts consider that China has entered a stage of frequent environmental health events that have accumulated in the process of abusing environmental resources to develop the economy.⁴³

³⁸ Beijing qingnian bao 北京青年报 [Beijing Youth Newspaper]. "Zhongguo jinnian wumai yingxiang renkou yueliuyi" 中国今年雾霾影响人口约 6 亿 [Hazy weather influenced 600 million people in China this year]. October 8, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/08/c_125490794.htm. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNIe7WOP>)

³⁹ "Huaihe zhili shinian, wuran yiran yanzhong" 淮河治理十年, 污染依然严重. [After ten years' treating, Huai River is still severely polluted], *Sina News*, 2004, accessed October 10, 2013, <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/huaihepollution/>. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNIj5eBY>)

⁴⁰ "Huangpujiang sizhu shijian" 黄浦江死猪事件 [Dead pig event in Huangpu River], *Sina News*, March 2013, accessed October 10, 2013, <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/sizhu/>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNIoe6lM>)

⁴¹ Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China. "2012 zhongguo huanjing zhuangkuang gongbao" 2012 中国环境状况公报 [2012 Public Report of Environmental Conditions in China]. May 28, 2013, <http://www.gzepb.gov.cn/hjzs/201306/P020130610453944170224.pdf>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNIxHGg0>)

⁴² "Woguo jinru lejixing huanjing jiankang shijian pinfaqi" 我国进入累积性环境健康事件频发期 [China has entered an era of frequent accumulated environmental health events], *China Daily*, June 20, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqgj/jryw/2013-06-20/content_9370429.html. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNJE1qeD>)

⁴³ Ibid.

Food safety has also become a topic that concerns most people in the country. It seems that everything could be fake or poisonous: fake eggs, fake soy sauce, poisonous milk powder and so on (Yan 2013). For instance, there have been major food supply safety incidents in the past few years. In 2012 the incident of producing medicine capsules with abandoned leather was exposed; in 2009 some nationally-known dairy brands were revealed to have added melamine into their products and caused kidney stones in a large number of babies, and melamine has become a nationally sensitive term; in 2005 KFC foods were reported to contain carcinogenic Sudan Red.⁴⁴ Other than these incidents that terrified the whole country, local food security issues are numerous, and discussion on certified organic food and GMO food has also been heated. As a result, the looming anxiety on this issue can be easily triggered and expressed. A public survey of 1,500 adults around the country carried out in 2011 showed that 80%-90% of interviewees were concerned with food safety, and 72% reported that they had less confidence in food compared to a year before (Xiao 2011).

Concerning environmental health and safe foods, there is a deep mistrust of the government and institutions as “they don’t really care about the long future, but environmental protection is not something that can succeed in one or two years like a performance. Officials get promoted or change their positions in a fairly short period of time so they don’t enjoy the fruit of (long term) environmental protection. And the process is painful. But how easy it is to tear down houses and build a public park or sell the land to developers? They get political achievements and opportunities for power-money trading! This is the fundamental problem (of current environmental issues).”⁴⁵

Other than physical health and well-being, psychological well-being has become a serious concern of ordinary individuals, the public and the state, as it has impacted individuals’ everyday life, the nation’s ethos, and public security.

⁴⁴ “Shinian jujiao: zhongguo 2000-2010nian zhongda shipin anquan shijian” 十年聚焦：中国 2000-2010 年重大食品安全事件 [Ten years: significant food security public events during 2000-2010], *39 Health*, accessed October 10, 2013, <http://news.39.net/a/2010829/1465224.html>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNJOGsIv>)

⁴⁵ Interview with Mr. Guo, an “urban farmer” in periurban Chengdu in May 2012.

At the turn of the century, China is going through one the most dramatic transformations of social ideology in several centuries, and people's self-worth and self-esteem are correspondingly impacted and reshaped, which is closely related to current social problems (Kleinman, 2011; 2013). This phenomenon is reflected in both urban and rural areas. Young people striving for their future lament about the flourishing and luxuriant urban center that has nothing to do with them, who are squeezed in "beehives" in a corner of big cities (Zhu 2013). The sixth census in 2011 shows that 7.04 million migrant workers try to make a living in Beijing; from 1987 to 2001 urban income increased by 6 percent every year, however the Gini coefficient (a reflection of income disparity) increased from 0.22 to 0.34; 13% to 20% of urban population is composed of migrant workers, whose average income is 60% lower than urban residents (Benjamin et al. 2005).

The income gap exacerbates the fluctuation and the worsening of society's collective mindset. In a report on public happiness finished in 2012, half of interviewees reported being neutral or slightly unhappy, and the most important elements that impact happiness are listed as health, low income, and stress. Nearly 15% informants considered that they "haven't achieved self-fulfillment or self-value," and metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai registered a lower sense of happiness compared to other cities (ING-BOB Life Insurance and Peking University Center for Social Survey and Research 2012). Ever since the industrial revolution people are disciplined to adapt to a lifestyle of endless work and consuming (Read 2009; Anagnost 2013) which constructs our subjectivity and the ultimate meaning of life. As a result, the share of material wealth in our thinking is ever expanding and the pain caused by dissatisfaction with it is aggravated (Zhu 2013).

Research shows that relative income, the comparison between individuals' income and the average of the reference group, is significantly associated with perceived happiness in Asian societies (Oshio et al. 2011). Not surprisingly, urban China is suffering from inferior well-being caused by inequality (Jiang et al. 2012). As mentioned above, the urban-rural disparity or social difference adds to the prevalent stress that exists in the collective unconsciousness and affects individuals' well-being in various ways.

However, urban residents, even white collar workers, the more well-off side of the social hierarchy, are not exempted from the inferior psychological well-being either. E. F. Schumacher has contended that good work should be meaningful and good for the soul, instead of meeting the requirement of industrial development and instrumentalizing people (Schumacher 1979). Some people suffer from this meaninglessness and started running away from cities and moving to rural or natural areas (Schmitz 2013).

The isolation in cities is reported to be associated with increasing mental diseases, as the lack of social connections and practice leave people lonely and socially insecure.⁴⁶ At the same time, the result of stress is apparent: employees would suddenly resign or take a long break to distance themselves from the busy life. Tourism has become an important vent for those who can afford it. The burden of consumer life, however, forces them to face the stark reality: “commodity prices, housing prices, and all other stress, anything would crush your self-esteem and make you doubt life in no time. But we can only keep doing it and relax ourselves a little bit from time to time” (Zhu 2013).

Besides individual well-being, a sense of community or the well-being of communities is also impacted and largely overlooked by policy makers. Community, interaction with people and social support are considered important for individual health (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and World Resources Institute 2003). Scholars pointed out for western urbanization in earlier history that loneliness and disruption of community, rate of change, competition and lack of security (Howarth 1976; Levy and Visotsky 1969) tended to cause mental problems. While forced to contact a large number of people and rapidly changing phenomena, meaningful physical contact and connection decrease. Although the dependence on each other increases, the division of labor and specialization result in the lack of community and retreating back to family and individuals (Clapp 1978).

⁴⁶ “Dachengshi de shenghuo leisigeren”大城市的生活“累死个人” [Life in big cities exhausts people to death]. *Deutsche Welle Chinese Version*, October 27, 2012, <http://www.dw.de/%E5%A4%A7%E5%9F%8E%E5%B8%82%E7%9A%84%E7%94%9F%E6%B4%BB%E7%B4%AF%E6%AD%BB%E4%B8%AA%E4%BA%BA/a-16327795>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNJisaV1>)

This phenomenon is extremely true in contemporary Chinese society, given the similar context of economic development and the rapid urbanization and wrenching changes of social structures. The series of suicide events in Foxconn struck the society and the isolation from colleagues and the lack of community were suspected to be one reason for it.⁴⁷

Earlier scholars consider the more relativistic view of the world and values in cities compared to small communities, reinforced by rapid change, less reality and universal principles, and an ethical uncertainty results in the lack of order, meaning and purpose (Clapp 1978; Thompson 2009). The confusion and uprootedness in the urban context are apparent causes of mental and spiritual problems. All these factors result in an existential homelessness which is the main “disease” to be healed, which is still true in the Chinese context. I would argue that a lack of meaning for life, a sense of being ungrounded in the world, and an existential homelessness are triggers of all kinds of problems in human society, as they are the ultimate quest for human beings (Frankl 1984), and also the causes of problems in contemporary China and Chengdu.

In sum, urban life is relatively competitive and driven by a sense of insecurity and anxiety of survival, without the awareness of the ultimate goal or meaning of individuals’ lives or community connection and support, while rural life leaves people in low self-respect, a psychological struggle from material survival and a feeling of deprivation. All these inferior health situations are threatening everyday life and well-being in contemporary China, and Chengdu is no exception.

2.4 The gap between existing policy and practice and pressing issues in health/well-being of everyday life

As described above, the current urban-rural integration policies in Chengdu endeavor to improve quality of life in both urban and rural areas, while some significant aspects of health and well-being for residents are overlooked and need to be paid special attention. The focus and approach

⁴⁷ “Zaiyi fushikang tiaolou shijian” 再议富士康跳楼事件 [Review of Foxconn suicide events], Guangming News, April 30, 2013, http://guancha.gmw.cn/2013-04/30/content_7482137.htm. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNJnCeJF>)

of these policies and their implementation still need to be developed in more subtle and humanistic ways. Furthermore, the basic concept of health, well-being and quality of life could be more comprehensive and holistic, and a human perspective, instead of a top-down angle, could be employed.

As much as western scholars doubt the idea of modernization and development, and Chinese scholars such as Wen Tiejun also consider urbanization as the flow of labor, land and capital from the rural to the urban sector,⁴⁸ Chengdu's policy of restructuring land, labor, and capital markets aims at "transforming traditional rural sectors and promoting their modernization." (Ye and LeGates 2013, 239) And the "three concentrations," concentrating agricultural land to "modernize" agriculture and rural areas forces, and concentrating rural housing, are ways to push rural population to the urban area. The new rural community is claimed to integrate more elements of city living into rural life in order to achieve an "urbanized rural life," closely related to consolidating land and housing (Ye and LeGates 2013, 265-266), without consulting with rural residents if that is a desired lifestyle.

GDP is still the best indicator to evaluate political achievement, and quantitative data of infrastructure construction, for instance the number of health care facilities, the area of consolidated agricultural land and so on, are given the most importance in policy consideration, as is reflected in official planning documents and government report to the public.⁴⁹ However, the real individual life (ordinary people including farmers and urban workers' struggle with their everyday encountering, their access to healthcare facilities, their sense of security and satisfaction or the anxiety, the lack of community support) is largely overlooked from the state's perspective.

⁴⁸ Wen Tiejun. Workshop on new rural development in China, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2013.

⁴⁹ "Woguo guominjingji he shehuifazhan shierwu guihuagangyao" 我国国民经济和社会发展十二五规划纲要 [The twelfth five-year plan for national economic and social development], *Sina News*, March 17, 2011, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-03-17/055622129864.shtml>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNJxZJKj>)

Municipal Government of Chengdu 成都市政府. "2013nian chengdushi zhengfu gongzuo baogao" 2013年成都市政府工作报告 [Municipal Government of Chengdu Annual Report for 2013]. January 17, 2014, http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/cd_know/detail.jsp?id=770975. Accessed: 2015-07-28. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aN3EZoVj>)

Wen Tiejun argues that agriculture for rural residents is not only the primary income source but also a pool to absorb and digest risk as a form of insurance, so that rural migrant workers have a place to return if they cannot survive in the city, with the restrictive *hukou* system that does not offer them a lot of benefits.⁵⁰ In this sense, the land is also an important social and psychological stabilizer when rural migrant workers know that they have a backup plan, and most of them do plan to return home after old age.⁵¹ The consolidation policy, the concentration of land and housing apparently ignored these functions of agricultural land and its meaning for individual rural residents, and only takes into account the economic indicators of the prefecture as a whole. This top-down quantitative approach could be moderated by consulting individual residents from different backgrounds about their feeling of health and well-being, and what would be the ramifications of massive implementation of certain policies.

Besides the content of the policy, its implementation could also be questionable. Tang Fuzhen was a house owner in periurban Chengdu, who immolated herself to prevent her house from being torn down and turned into urban land use.⁵² This event happened in 2009 and triggered broad public concern for the justice of urbanization. The consolidation and concentration processes are a similar process that is still going on and needs to be carefully observed. If residents who are impacted by these policies are deprived of freedom or choice of their future life and living conditions, as mentioned in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, this aspect of well-being is not achieved.

In contrast, grassroots efforts are seeking their own way of coping urbanization. Ningyuan Village in the periurban area around Chengdu, the main field of this research, is famous for conducting organic and natural farming and providing farming opportunities and safe foods to

⁵⁰ Wen Tiejun. Workshop on new rural development in China, University of Washington, Seattle, May 2013.

⁵¹ “Xili dakao: chengshihua”“习李”大考：城市化 [Challenges for Xi and Li: urbanization], Financial Times in Chinese (Beijing), February 8, 2013, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001048912>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNK7QtKE>)

⁵²“Chengdu chaiqianhu Tangfuzhen zifen siwang” 成都拆迁户唐福珍自焚死亡 [Tang Fuzhen, House Owner to Be Relocated, Burned Herself to Death]. *Renminwang* 人民网 [People’s Net], Dec 3, 2009, <http://society.people.com.cn/GB/10498808.html>. Accessed: 2015-07-29. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6aNBHrVf>)

urban residents. Farmers here work closely with NGOs to promote knowledge of the ecosystem and permaculture and the village serves as a place for environmental education. It is also a place to connect urban and rural individuals through physical activities, food and nature. The practice that is carried out in their field provides a sense of security, equality and connection, and is viewed as a therapeutic landscape. Host farmers, NGO workers, “urban farmers” who participate in programs in the village, vegetable consumers in the city, and other people who support the programs have formed a new kind of community, with the result that the village has become a psychological home for many people.

However, following the municipal policies of concentration, this village is also facing consolidation of agricultural land and housing, in which scenario it will be very difficult to continue the current practice. Farming will be far from consolidated housing and the travel between them takes time and effort, provided their land will not be consolidated into a modern industrialized farm. It is highly possible that this healing place will face great difficulties and the well-being benefits it provides will terminate. This is a case that is not considered in the policy and should be paid more attention when related decisions are made to improve holistic quality of life.

In terms of physical health and well-being, with the worsening pollution, food safety issues and the increasing rate of “modern diseases” such as high blood sugar, obesity, diabetes, heart diseases, stroke, and all kinds of cancer, physical health is paid more and more attention by individuals, including both urban and rural residents, especially considering the unsound insurance system and unsatisfying service provided by medical institutions (Duckett 2011; Farquhar and Zhang 2012).

It can be seen from the Chengdu case that the government’s perspective is also quite top-down in terms of health care, focusing more on infrastructure, facilities and quantitative data, and less on individuals’ everyday life, compared to the definition of well-being by Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. And according to Ye’s field work, even with the existing policy and improved infrastructure, villagers have difficulties with the complicated procedure, primarily paperwork, to participate and get reimbursed at the low insurance level (Ye and LeGates 2013, 172).

Consequently, individuals are more and more engaged in self-investment and self-protection to struggle for a better life (Duckett 2011; Farquhar and Zhang 2012; Ta 2011):

“Wen Jiabao (the premier at the time when my field work was carried out) talked about food safety; but only when we take care of ourselves could we be secured. We don’t trust anyone else. Health is the first (concern) and work is second.”⁵³

Other than the above-mentioned gaps between the policy and current needs of physical health and well-being, psychological well-being and community well-being are hardly touched by the current governmental practice. Creating new rural communities has been the stated goal of official doctrines (Ye and LeGates 2013) but most of these policies focus on the physical form of housing instead of a sense of community and good social relationship, which is another component of human well-being (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003). These factors are not less important than the construction of infrastructure and economic indicators in improving the quality of life and creating healthy and human places and cities.

2.5 Summary

The policy making in Chengdu to integrate urban and rural development and to provide holistic benefits to residents is an effort that is worth encouraging, but certain aspects of human well-being are overlooked and the implementation of policies should be carried out in a discreet manner. As analyzed above, whether the concentration of land, housing and farming is desirable for residents’ well-being needs more research, and, if so, specific implementation strategies need to be thought out well. Not only the quantitative goals and material improvements of urban and rural development influences residents’ well-being, the process of urbanization and urban-rural integration affects people’s sense of independence, empowerment, and control. Besides disposable income, medical care infrastructure and quantity and accessibility to medical care providers, safe food is essential for physical health and more desired by individual citizens than concentrating land and developing industrial-scale agriculture. Other than quantifiable indicators

⁵³ Interview with “urban farmer”, May 2012, periurban Chengdu.

of human health, a sense of peace, connection and at-homeness is significant for psychological well-being, and is largely overlooked in governmental policies.

In addition to the public sector, there are certain other participants taking part in this landscape, trying to improve urban and rural life. Grassroots organizations are vibrant in Chengdu and a lot of them have human and environmental concerns. The Chengdu Ecological Preservation Association (CEPA) has been making an endeavor to improve water quality in rivers that provide potable water to Chengdu area, and they work closely with local communities, providing environmental-quality data and financial and human resource support. Black Soil is an environmental NGO, working with rural communities and connecting them to urban residents and potential consumers. New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) is an ongoing alternative development movement in China (Day 2008; Hale 2013), that was proposed by some scholars in the early twentieth century and revived in recent years since the worsening of the “three rural problems” (Day 2008), and various individuals and organizations play a role in it in the Chengdu area. Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an idea borrowed from the U.S and Europe (DeMuth and National Agricultural Library 1993) and has bloomed in China in the past few years. Ningyuan Village is an example of it, providing safe foods and farming opportunities to urban residents. With the pressing issues of food safety, it is not surprising that physical exercise, safe food and bodily health are the first motivations of consumers and urban farmers, as presented in the interview conversation above. Selling vegetables directly to subscribers and renting out plots of land to “urban farmers” also compensate rural residents’ annual income, benefiting the rural sector reciprocally.

Concerning psychological and community well-being, this village with its urban farmers program, environmental education series, outreach to urban communities, and other activities emplaced or expanded from it, provides relevance and significance. Policy makers should take heed of the lessons and experiences from these private sectors’ practices of improving life in cities and periurban areas: policy making process should consult real people’s quests for well-being and quality of life, especially those that are currently not reflected by statistical data, for example, qualitative experience of well-being, such as the basic need of safe food, getting into natural settings, and making friends and having community support. To take into account these

factors that influence quality of life, and to take a more bottom-up and humanistic perspective are beneficial for the society in multiple ways. It allows room for a comprehensive understanding of health and well-being that comes from communities, instead of imposing policies that primarily focus on the material aspects of health on communities. This research aims to either complement or challenge governmental efforts in promoting individual and communities' well-being, for which purpose the following chapters will discuss grassroots efforts especially the experiment or practice in Ningyuan Village in greater depth.

Chapter 3 Situating Ningyuan Village in Chengdu Plain

On my way back to Beijing after my fieldwork in Chengdu, I chatted with two young women whose seats faced mine in the sleeper train. They are library staff working in Sichuan University in Chengdu, going to Beijing for a conference. Knowing that I did fieldwork in Chengdu for my dissertation in an American university, they got very curious where specifically my field was, and what the topic was about.

“It is about organic or natural farming and human health, and my field is in a village around Chengdu,” I said.

“Ah...Ningyuan Village?” One of them said in a guessing manner.

“Right, we have colleagues who have visited there and it is well known in Chengdu,” the other one complemented.

“Yes... but how come you were able to guess it right?” I asked.

Affirming that it is my field, I was the one who was surprised and realized that its name is so influential that even people I meet randomly on a train would be able to guess it. Among hundreds of urban neighborhoods and rural villages administrated by Chengdu, it is hard to believe that Ningyuan Village popped up into people’s minds so immediately. Not until that point, when I had already finished my fieldwork, did this fact occur to me. Reflecting on my experience in the village, I was more convinced that this place as a humble but uncommon rural village has some magical power that attracts urban people who usually look down upon rural environment and people.

3.1 Environmental recovery and natural farming in Ningyuan

Several years ago a local environmental NGO, Chengdu Ecological Preservation Association (CEPA), because of its governmental background (its leader was a former municipal Environmental Protection Bureau official), got the opportunity to work on drinking water

sources for the urban area of Chengdu. The Fucheng River, which runs through Ningyuan Village, was chosen to be an experimental site. They brought knowledge and techniques of the ecosystem, for example the famous natural farming practices of Fukuoka Masanobu (1978) and his book "*The One-Straw Revolution*." I got fascinated by Fukuoka and his methods before I visited Ningyuan, but to me it seemed more or less an idealist declaration against the phenomenon of over industrialized agriculture and ecological crisis all over the world, and I assumed people in China who would read his books were yuppies and new-age people who have solved their mundane material life problems but feel empty in their minds. Imagining farmers, whose stereotype is vulgar, uneducated and illiterate, to read Fukuoka feels like a strange and even impossible juxtaposition. They did accept, however, his core ideas of natural farming and have absorbed them and integrated them into their practice, changing some specific techniques to make it work for local conditions.

Farmers were not familiar with traditional non-chemical farming anymore when they started, and, as a result, harvests suffered dramatically, but they managed to stay with it, learning to work with the natural system. In time, they improved their way of farming, successfully bringing production back to a normal level. At the beginning, several households formed a natural farming group to help one other, producing and selling vegetables together. This informal cooperative farming collective experienced membership turn over several times and by the time I did my research they were mostly working separately, each household as a producing unit and having their stable groups of subscribers.

Each household typically farms on several *mu* of land, growing various kinds of vegetables in different seasons. Different from their neighboring villages who plant mostly the same flowers or trees on all their land, here each kind of vegetable only occupies a small plot or even one line in the field, so a diversity of plants are maintained. This heterogeneous ecosystem is stronger than a homogenous one, and vegetable subscribers get several different kinds of vegetables every time.

Vegetable subscription is the main income source for these families. In addition, the Chen family sells herb products and the urban farmer program also supplements income for them. The rent is 20 RMB (about 3-4 dollars) per square meter for a year. With average harvest, the rent is higher

than the income from selling vegetables produced from the same area of land, but for urban middle class people, it is cheaper than a lot of common entertainments: gyms, karaoke, mahjong, etc. This urban farmer program is highly popular among clients. There are 30 to 40 long term urban farmer families, and new participants have to sign up for the waiting list and stay there for at least several months before getting their slot in the field.

The village now has access to internet, although the connection is not always smooth or functioning; several households have online blogs and individual farmers have weibo (the Chinese version of twitter) accounts and some have established a large following in Chengdu and even other cities. Farmers would announce online before they go to the city to have a special sale of vegetables or herbs, and it also serves as a platform for spreading information of their environmental events and education programs. They also post knowledge of the environment and the ecosystem online. Although they are maintaining traditional agricultural activities, social media plays an important role in connecting what is practiced in the rural sector and the consumer's end in the urban area.

3.2 Unique history and culture of Chengdu

Chengdu as the capital city of Sichuan province has been the major city in southwest China for over two thousand years, established as a city in 331 BCE. Because of the mild climate and fertile farming land, Chengdu enjoys high productivity and has been called the heavenly city (*tianfu* 天府) (Statistical Bureau of Chengdu 1998, 1). Although in history there has been sporadic turmoil and revolution in this area, geographically the Sichuan Basin, where the province is located, is isolated by mountains around, so it was able to avoid being affected by a lot of warfare, and local people are generally considered mild, calm, and less competitive than the rest of China. Although being leisurely has become the stereotypical image of Chengdu and even Sichuan as a whole, there is truth to it to some extent. Similar to many people's experience in Chengdu, I found local residents travel at a slower pace in the street, including both pedestrians and automobiles. My other impression of this region is that compared to the rest of China, people are more accepting of surrounding environments, worrying less about material wealth and are more interested in public service, environmental issues, and enjoying everyday

life.

Other than the famous hot spicy cuisine, Sichuan is also considered the best place to enjoy slow life for a long time. In history there is a saying that young people should not go to Sichuan because they would lose the will of competition, as life there is too easy. Although life has become faster and more competitive in the contemporary context, the difference between Sichuan and other areas, between Chengdu and other metropolitan cities, is highly visible to me. An anecdotal explanation would argue that the natural conditions made production and life easier so that people spend time in many areas that are considered luxurious in the rest of China. I was surprised by the number of environmental NGOs that are based in Chengdu, and their devotion and enthusiasm to environmental issues. People working in these organizations show certain idealist characteristics, and a deep attachment to nature instead of to individual “success”, such as wealth, power, and fame.

I met Lin Fan through one of my academic advisers as both of them were involved in environmental recovery, education and research in Ningyuan Village. The leader of a local grassroots environmental NGO, Lin was in his early thirties. When I met him in summer 2011, he was casually dressed in his big t-shirt and sandals, with an ordinary look of an average young man from Chengdu, pleasant and leisurely. But when he started talking about an environmental education project they were implementing, which was documenting local knowledge and oral history in a mountainous and less developed area of Sichuan, his enthusiasm and energy glowed and spread some magical power over the coffee shop where we were having the meeting. My intuition immediately told me that this was an interesting person and I should take this chance to know him more, as I do not meet people like him often in my twenty something years’ life experience in China. So when he asked me about my research, I shared my ideology of ethical, natural and spiritual living, my interest in organic farming and my attitude against positivism, duality and reductionism. I rarely disclose this part of myself because most of the time it does not communicate well with people, as it would be considered abstract, idealist and too philosophical and not interest people who care mostly about their material wealth and everyday living condition. But Lin Fan’s eyes blazed and we started talking about organic farming and authors like Fukuoka Masanobu (1978), the ecosystem and civilization, the crisis of oil consumption in

the world, psychology and personal development, Buddhism and Taoism etc.

Therefore when I returned to Chengdu in spring of 2012 for the second phase of field work, Lin Fan was the first person with whom I thought to work. I was received by him in the most welcoming way and got to know more about his life and ideas. He went through hardships in his childhood, growing up poor and less educated than most people, so he used to serve in the military just to support himself, keeping himself from starving. Then he worked in the media for several years and in the process of reporting environmental problems he realized that these are crucial issues in the current society, so he gave up this source of stable income and formed his environmental NGO. Registering for a non-governmental organization, no matter what form it is in, is sensitive and therefore tricky and all-consuming. He went through all the paperwork and political censoring and then after several years of struggle the organization finally started to function on a regular basis. Now he is self-employed with only several colleagues and he almost always has to worry about funding resources and salary for colleagues. But he didn't seem to worry too much about practical issues; talking to him made me feel young and energetic, as his optimistic and engaged concerns about the environment, rural development, and even the general human condition were beyond mundane issues and almost otherworldly.

I am from the east part of China, far away from Sichuan, and my prevalent impression is that personal success, which is mostly evaluated by material wealth, and the pursuit of "a good life" are the main themes of people's life around me. So this transcendent view of life was so different from things I was familiar with that it deeply intrigued me. After he talked about other local grassroots organizations they cooperated with, I couldn't resist bringing up this question, "I have a feeling that your organization and others are very different from their counterpart in cities I have lived in, say, Beijing and other cities in the east. Actually I don't think there are so many environmental NGOs there. It seems that practical issues don't concern you so much and public service interests you more. Why is that?"

An exploring look appeared in his face again, and after several seconds of thinking he said, "Maybe because the local environment is fertile and has been providing enough food for everyone, we are more easily satisfied with our economic conditions. My personal experience

also taught me to care about more important things in this world instead of immediate interests.” At that time it was not entirely clear to me what he meant by “more important things”, but he became a key figure in my research and those findings will be discussed later in this text.

Beside these environmental NGOs’ public service enthusiasm and otherworldly pursuit, Sichuan Province especially Chengdu is generally famous for its leisurely lifestyle and especially relaxing activities. Enjoying tea for half a day, playing mahjong, and indulging in a foot massage are the most well-known entertainments in Chengdu, but are not so prevalent in other places. Even after the 2008 earthquake in which over 80,000 people died, people were seen sitting on the ruins of their houses and playing mahjong, or sleeping in public plazas at night for emergency concerns and playing mahjong during the day.

In such a regional context, the linear distance between Ningyuan Village and the urban core of Chengdu is 32 kilometers (about 20 miles), but the highway goes around the city and local roads are narrower and usually crowded, so it takes about one hour to drive there. If we take public transit, after several transfers of buses and/or the subway, which takes 2 to 3 hours, or the newly built high speed railway that takes 20 something minutes from the urban core of Chengdu to the county seat, and a bus for 30 minutes or so and a motorcycle, or the so-called *tuk tuk* trip for another 20 minutes, we arrive at the village committee, also the entrance of Ningyuan. The Chen family is the core organizer of the natural farming groups in the village, and has been practicing organic farming since 2005. With their reputation built up among the community interested in nature, healthy food, and environment issues, they have developed the program of selling produce to urban residents, renting land to urban farmers who can grow their food there, providing caterings for various activities taking place in their house, providing organic herbs and herbal products to related communities, and so forth.

3.3 Geography and local economic background

Ningyuan Village is located in the larger Chengdu Plain that is within Sichuan Basin, more isolated and protected compared to other parts of China (Figure 3), with a unique rural landscape and settlement pattern. This special social-ecosystem, called *Linpan* (林盘, meaning “forest basin”), exists exclusively in Chengdu Plain, typically in moist and mild climates, producing rice

as the main crop. The physical structure of *linpan* is composed with natural elements of bamboos, trees and water bodies such as rivers, canals and creeks, and social elements of a house, a courtyard, and agricultural fields. The social structure is usually a nuclear family occupying one unit of *linpan* with different units are scattered on the wider land of the plain. It evolved over thousands of years, resulting from the influence from multiple local conditions, including geography and climate, agricultural and irrigation systems, ancient local civilization of *shu* (蜀), Taoist belief, immigration history, and the tradition of separated housing of nuclear families instead of concentrated living of extended families. The basic structure of *linpan* as an integrated system of living and farming forms larger spatial structures of townships and cities in this region, too (Duan and Liu 2004). *Linpan*, as the foundation of the ecosystem, also played a significant role in the forming of the market system and the hierarchical city system in the local history (Skinner and Baker 1977). An exploration of Chengdu's agricultural history, especially in Qing Dynasty, reveals that *Linpan* was an important element in the self-organization of the distribution of agricultural labor and production (Fang and Zhou 2011). Contemporary scholars recognize the social, ecological, cultural, and aesthetic values of *Linpan* and the urgency of *Linpan* landscape preservation (Yang et.al 2011).

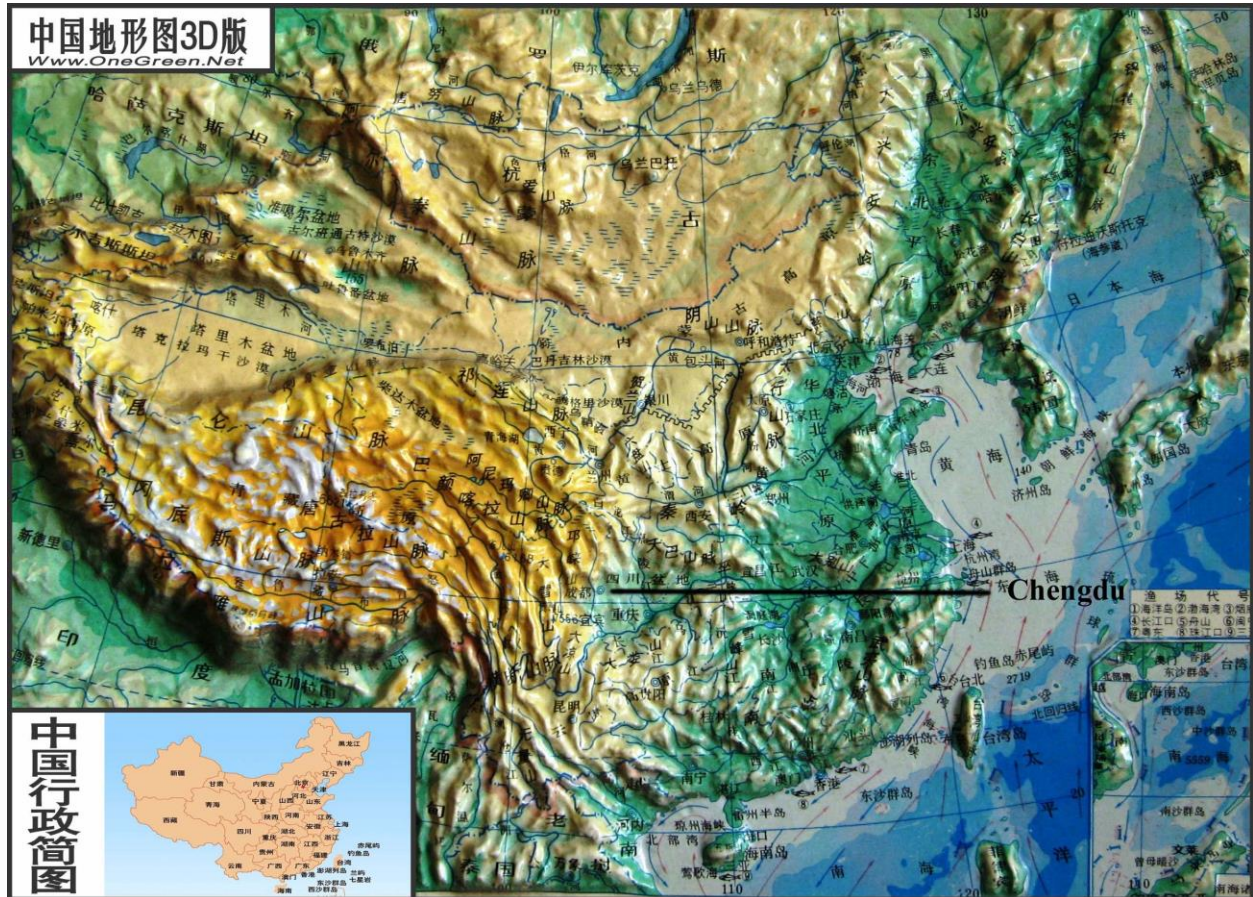


Figure 3. Location of Chengdu in China, showing its relative topographical isolation. (Map by www.onegreen.net.)

The commonly accepted concept of villages in this area is not functional but primarily based on administrative divisions. Most villages are composed of 15-30 *linpan* and the distance between two of them is usually about 200-300 meters (about 220-330 yards) and perfectly walkable. Because of the proximity of housing and fields, farming is convenient as where it takes place right next to the house. Households are relatively independent from one another and because of the scant distances separating families, and therefore social relationships are relatively easy to start and maintain. Not like many other rural areas in China where villages are both ecological and administrative entities, the demarcation of villages in Linpan landscapes are only for administrative purposes. Ecologically, the juxtaposition of forests, bamboos, plants, water, and agricultural fields creates a certain degree of complexity in the ecosystem and maintains habitats for various animals. From the perspective of human beings as an element in this ecosystem,

forests serve as wind shield in winter and sun break in summer; the water element in the system provides crop irrigation, and the convenience of the fields and recyclable materials of the house provide economic benefits. Local houses are primarily built with recyclable woods, stalks, bamboos, and tiles that can be acquired locally on a sustainable basis (Duan and Liu 2004). *Linpan* landscape is the result of thousands of years of evolution and has sustainably provided multiple ecosystem services. Ningyuan village is also a typical *linpan* landscape, and the physical features and social functions of it certainly contribute to its alternative lifestyle experiment.

Linpan landscape, however, in spite of its long history and ecological adaptability, is facing multiple crises now. The local population has increased exponentially since 1949 (Duan and Liu 2004) and city expansion has encroached into rural areas. Because of better economic income in cities, a large number of rural residents, especially younger generations, move to work in the city providing manual labor. As a result, rural income is mostly relying on younger generations' work in cities as people who remain in agricultural areas are children, the physically challenged or elderly. Agriculture is largely abandoned and a huge amount of land is left idle. Besides, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the New Socialist Village Construction and Integrated Urban-Rural Development programs have pushed infrastructure construction, housing and farming concentration, and urban lifestyle into villages and are threatening traditional everyday farming life.

Villages in Chengdu Plain also face these problems. Some local governments are trying to find new economic drivers. For instance, neighboring villages of Ningyuan are famous for rural tourism, ornamental flowers, plants, and wood sculptures production, and have transformed their economies from traditional agriculture to these so-called new economic opportunities.

Ningyuan, on the other hand, is trying to stay with vegetable and rice farming and even goes further to be more traditional than ordinary agriculture that is currently practiced by most farmers, keeping food production as the main livelihood but in a more creative and ecologically sensitive way.

3.4 A tour of Ningyuan Village

The street view of Chengdu is not less prosperous than any big city in China: commercial, residential and other buildings are densely distributed all over the city, neon lights make the night like daytime, streets are lined with bars, shopping malls, restaurants, convenience stores etc., crowded with people, and luxurious goods and consumerism are seen everywhere. From the urban core of Chengdu to Ningyuan, either by driving or public transit, the landscape changes dramatically along the way. As soon as we arrive at the township seat of Ningli (the township that administers Ningyuan Village),⁵⁴ roads turn narrower with fewer lanes. We begin to see agricultural fields along the road where the bus travels, more motorcycles, which are smaller and cheaper than cars, run on the roads, and streets are lined up with stores selling cheaper clothes, copycat cellphones, agricultural tools and machines, restaurants serving simple meals like fried rice or noodles, and so forth. People in villages call the township seat, the more urbanized area as “the street” (*jieshang* 街上), and going to visit there is called “going to the street to have fun” (*shangjiequshua* 上街去耍). Once we enter the village it is obvious why these terms are used: the narrow main road, or, better put, the trail, meanders along the river and hardly accommodates two cars side by side. There is not any street with stores in the village, and different from the urban area in the township seat, here a productive natural landscape dominates people’s view instead of a consuming humanly-made one.

As public transit is not very convenient to the village, not to mention to every house in the village, most families here have an automobile to get in and out of the village on a daily basis. To walk around the village takes quite some time but to most visitors it is a highly enjoyable experience. At the entrance of the village, I usually take the main road to the north, which goes along Fucheng River that constitutes one of the dominant landscape elements in the village and serves as the drinking water source of the city of Chengdu. The atmosphere immediately changes with the road, or better described, the trail, all lined and covered with thick bamboos (Figure 4).

⁵⁴ The administrative division in China is a hierarchical structure. From the top to the bottom are: the province or autonomous city, the municipality or city, the county, the township, the village, one following another, with the higher level administrating or taking charge of the neighboring lower one.

In summer, the heat is greatly moderated with plants shielding the scorching sun, and the mild breeze from the river evaporating sweat. The river is on my right side, and from the void between plants, the neighboring village on the other side of the river and their agricultural plants and trees can be seen (Figure 5). I would pass two houses before I reach the Chen's house, where I stayed for my fieldwork, and both houses are on the left side of the trail (Figure 6). With tiled houses surrounded by clusters of bamboos and trees, which are again surrounded by this family's agricultural fields, these are typical *linpan* landscapes (Figure 6).



Figure 4. Bamboos covering the trail around the village.



Figure 5. The view of the neighboring village.



Figure 6. One of the houses in the village, a typical linpan landscape.

As soon as we arrive at the Chen's house on our left, turning off the trail into their *linpan*, a water treatment structure enters the view (Figure 7). CEPA helped the family build the pool, with several layers of pebbles and fine sand filtering rain water, demonstrating that the hydrophytes planted at the bottom level can grow well with the water after treatment (Figure 8). This site is observed frequently in environmental education programs.



Figure 7. The water treatment facility outside Chen's house.



Figure 8. Hydrophytes growing in the water treatment facility.

Chen's main hall in their house is usually crowded with visitors and urban farmers; group lunch and dinner take place here quite often. At other times, females take this space to organize vegetables that are going to be delivered to subscribers, or work on other house chores. Going through the main hall, a compost heap and a fermented manure pool are covered under shelters, to the right of a narrower trail that leads through Chen's fields (Figure 9). They use these treated natural fertilizers instead of chemicals to practice natural farming.



Figure 9. The narrow trail leading through Chen's field.

Mr. Chen, the head of the household, cares about the rural condition and agriculture very much, which he considers as “very dangerous:” the huge losses of agricultural land and farmers disquiets him and he insisted on staying here when developers tried to convince him to move in 2008. During my stay in the family, I often saw him talking to visitors in a serious but hopeful manner, his thin but muscular figure loosely wrapped in his old light blue shirt (a common outfit of Chinese farmers), with a face greatly tanned from outdoor work and wrinkled with age. “If we all take the money and move to the city, the land is lost and even fewer people are engaged in agriculture, and in the future who will be growing food for people? If all farmers only care about money, the fastest way to get money is to rob the bank. But it is more important to stick to the land and heal the wounded land.” “We don’t use any chemical, which is the same as poisoning our *mother land*. Even if we don’t make money, we cannot do this immoral thing.” So in addition to compost and fermented manure, they also purchase bio-fertilizers to increase the nutritional elements in the soil. There is one kind of fertilizer that is used locally which is called *youku* (油枯, literally means “when the oil is out”) and is made of residues of seeds after the oil is extracted, for example *youku* from rapeseeds, cottonseeds, soybeans, sesame, peanuts and so on.

Their ideas apparently have resonated and influenced other members of this “emplaced” community. I am always surprised that some visitors are so knowledgeable of agriculture that they can quote examples, research, or experience of organic farming from other places as readily as recalling old friends’ names. International experiences are familiar to them too: “foreigners don’t like our agriculture; they consider manure as excretion and this small-scale agriculture can’t be compared with their ranches. However we get food from nature (*tian* 天, literally “the heaven” in Chinese) but they turned the rural into big factories, relying on machines and big scales.” Ou, who I met on his trip to the village because of their fame, continued to talk about three dimensional agriculture in Israel: “They use nutritional liquid to provide fertilizer to vegetables to save space and produce more food. That’s definitely not natural and not healthy. There are a lot of trace elements in the soil, and the nutritional liquid cannot provide complete nutrition as the soil.” Obviously he was satisfied with what he saw in Ningyuan and his conversation with the host family, and expressed the will to join the urban farmers program sometime.

If we continue walking from the manure heap we enter the fields; usually there are several farmers working in the plots, their figures half-hidden in crops (Figure 10). On weekends every small plot of land is worked; these are the so-called “urban farmers” taking care of their land and vegetables when they are off work (Figure 11). In most cases they choose the vegetables they grow and the hosting family would give them suggestions or vegetable seeds. Over the year, an incomplete list of crops and vegetables grown here could include: rice, green beans, okra, soy beans, corn, sunflowers, cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, peanuts, peppers, eggplants, squashes, marrow squashes, taro, pumpkins, winter melons, luffa, asparagus lettuce, cabbage, watermelon, bitter melon, spring onion, arugula, water spinach (*kongxincai* 空心菜), *houத்துynia cordata*, *gynura bicolor* (*xuepicai* 血皮菜), *amaranthus* (*xiancai* 苋菜) and so forth. Therefore, the landscape in the field changes over time and visiting there at different times would yield different experiences. If we go into the field to look closely at the soil, it is the habitat of all kinds of worms, earthworms, ants, and other animals that live in the soil and make it soft and fertile. This is one of the achievements after turning to natural farming; without chemicals worms came back and contribute to the soil system and the farming process.



Figure 10. Chen's field with farmers working in it.



Figure 11. Urban farmers working in their field.

To the middle of Chen's field, on the left of the trail is the herb garden with several greenhouse booths and a wooden hut, where butterflies and bees visit frequently (Figure 12). The collection of herbs here is large, with over thirty kinds planted, including but not limited to: lavender, rosemary, sage, different kinds of mint, basil, verbena, catnip, stevia, perilla, German chamomile, geranium, borage, thyme, marjoram, patchouli, etc (Figure 13). This herb garden attracts all kinds of visitors and is often used as an important site for environmental education programs (Figure 14). Signs indicating the names, origins and basic information of different plants are put up for education purposes (Figure 15) and this section is usually warmly welcomed by participants, including adults and children, as most urban residents lack a knowledge of nature and the ecosystem, not to mention the history of plants.



Figure 12. Viewing the herb garden from the field.
(Photo by He Lei.)



Figure 13. Plants in the herb garden.
(Photo by He Lei.)



Figure 14. Visitors to the herb garden during an environmental education program.
(Photo by He Lei.)



Figure 15. Educational signs in the herb garden.
(Photo by He Lei.)

Passing the herb garden there is a pond connecting small irrigation canals that carry water from Fucheng River to the middle of the field. With wetland plants surrounding the pond, it creates an aesthetic experience to pass by. When I conducted my fieldwork there, I would go to sit by the shore and enjoy the sound of water in the pond, the reflection of the sky and clouds, and a period of solitude.

CEPA's environmental education base is the next stop and it is a humble wooden structure that overlooks the pond. There are models of traditional farming tools on display in the base, and environmental NGOs and other institutions use the space for collective activities and events. Passing this hut we have finished a counter-clockwise trip around the central part of the village and back to the inner entrance on the trail.

3.5 Vegetable subscription and distribution

Skinner's work (1978) in the 1970s pointed out that vegetable supply is mostly self-sufficient within a municipality, and the peri-urban area is more intensive in terms of vegetable production, for ecological and marketing reasons. Although conditions have changed substantially, in Ningyuan vegetable production is still one of the main sources of income.

Vegetable subscription is the main program that economically supports these farmers' natural farming practice. When the field work was carried out, the price of vegetables was about 1 dollar per *jin*, relatively expensive compared to average produce sold in grocery stores, but about the same price or cheaper than certified organic produce. Subscribers do not have a choice of which vegetables they get because here they only grow vegetables according to seasons; vegetables in improper seasons such as tomatoes in winter are not produced here. But subscribers do get a choice of the amount of vegetables they need, and farmers would mix vegetables that are ready from the field and pack them with their green bags printed with words like "natural vegetables" and their names and phone numbers.

I have been to vegetable delivery trips with one of the farmers, and it is a day-long drive all over Chengdu and surrounding townships. They make these trips twice a week to serve different subscribers so people get vegetables once a week and can solely rely on these for food. Usually the weight of these vegetables would be more than what they subscribed because the producing family believe in doing good to people and do not want them to lose anything. Bags of fresh vegetables would be left in the entrance office of different housing complexes all over Chengdu, and people can get them when they are off from work in the afternoon.

3.6 Cooperation with schools and education programs

The village is also in close connection with local educational institutions and programs. Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) is considered one of the important scholars or founders of the academic area of philosophical anthropology or anthropological philosophy, which primarily studies people's life, the meaning and well-being of it, and other deep philosophical issues related to human life (Bang 2005; Steiner 1999, 2000). This research is greatly inspired by

these works and heavily relies on scholars who work in this field, Steiner included. I found it exciting that Ningyuan village works closely with the local Waldorf School, which is a branch of the bigger Waldorf School system, whose main pedagogy and approach to education are based on Steiner's ideas of anthroposophy. In line with Steiner's thoughts, this school educates children in a way that is drastically different from most Chinese schools that only focus on exam results. The school serves elementary and junior high school levels with a total of 9 years of education available. Every student at the elementary school level has to spend a week in the village to learn about food, nature, and rural life. Besides, a lot of teachers and students' parents from the school are believers in natural farming and enthusiastic patrons of farmers in this village.

Farmers here also work with college students' organizations that focus on environmental issues, middle schools, community colleges and special technology schools from nearby townships and cities. Education programs are also initiated by environmental NGOs and local governments, serving students from these schools and residents from Chengdu and other urban areas around the village. The emphasis on education situates the village as a crucial node that connects people from dramatically different backgrounds and spreads knowledge that is progressive and embodied and not taught a lot in most schools.

3.7 A day in Ningyuan Village

Visitors' perceptions of the village might be eye-opening, inspiring and intriguing, while people who spend their everyday life in the village might have different perspectives. Daily experience in the village observed by my eyes and other senses is busy but serene and calming. My day in Ningyuan Village started at 7am while the Chen family got up at about 5:30 in the morning, trying to work in the field before the summer sun gets too hot. There are several neighbors who are females in their early sixties and would come to help with farming. Their own land is rented out to younger people and natural farming requires more human labor, so their assistance is necessary to Chen's production. These ladies would come after breakfast, which is about 8am, and the morning would be spent in the field with various kinds of work. Sometimes it is planting tomatoes, sometimes it is digging potatoes from the soil, and time passes quickly to me. These women would make friendly fun of me when I am clumsy with farming tools or make a mistake

repeatedly. Lunch time is usually filled with relaxed chatting, and the host family would ask helpers to take a nap in their house before they resume work for the rest of the day. The afternoon is similar to the morning: planting peanuts, harvesting marrow squashes, taking out rapeseeds from dried plants, etc. Dinner is quieter as helpers would have left by then, and after dinner the host family would still be working in the hall with lights. It was usually great fun and a learning opportunity for me, watching them doing curious things or listening to them teaching me new things.

One night Sister Chen was making an environment for microbes in the kitchen and I stood by her, listening with great curiosity as if I were being enlightened. Leftover rice from the day was loosened up then mixed with crushed brown sugar. Then the mixture was packed into a container and buried in a plot of soft soil. In spring when the temperature is about 20°C it takes 5 to 7 days before microbes multiply, and then more brown sugar is added into the mixture to produce more microbes. Then water is added in to dilute the liquid, which is the final product and can be used to spray into the soil to expel harmful insects. In this way they avoid using chemicals but also solve the insects problem.

Some evenings would be the time for watching Sister Chen making essential oils, which is highly intriguing. She put bundles of herbs into the distiller, which is taller than a person, turn on the machine and continue adding herbs, and several milliliters of essential oil will be collected after some time. As an observer I never knew before that life could be so independent and creative, and these evening experiences were extremely eye-opening for me.

On weekends the rhythm is totally different. After breakfast there would be urban farmers coming; some would ask for breakfast, which is not usually provided but the host family doesn't charge for it. These farmers go to work in the field, while half of the host family would be working in the kitchen so that lunch can be put on table on time. There is tacit agreement that lunch is at 12:30 as these farmers are familiar with the family, but if anyone didn't know it, the host family would send one person, sometimes it was me, to the field and make a loud announcement so that everyone hears it. There is no way to use email or other fancy techniques to notify them, not even the phone, but this pre-modern exclamation creates a sense of

community and familiarity. When I was the person who carried out this job, people in the field would start talking to me, then we would see a group of them walking back with tools, talking and smiling with one another.

During lunch time the hall is crowded with urban farmers; some of them would volunteer to help in the kitchen, and the host family wouldn't be rigorous about how many people ate there and how many people paid. Some would forget to pay for the meal but they would remember to pay for it the next time when they were there. The exchange is based on trust instead of surveillance.

After doing dishes, cleaning the hall, half an afternoon is passed. Some urban farmers would come back to return farming tools after their work in the afternoon, and linger to chat with the family at dusk. After urban farmers leave, the yard becomes quiet again, and the host family would all sit together to prepare vegetables that will be delivered the next day.

And there are other events taking place in this site. I participated in one, which also serves as a testimony for the unique personality of local people. I met Angel in the village when she tried to find a setting for her social service movie. She is a voice therapist from Taiwan and she was concerned with searching the meaning of life in the contemporary context and the resulting confusion in human mind. The movie was aimed to bring up these questions and inspire contemplation instead of making profits out of it, so nobody working on the movie was paid but everyone was volunteering. After she started talking to people about this idea it was received passionately; she soon got a site as housing for actors and actress and the gathering place. Actually, during my field work, this apartment in central Chengdu was where I spent a lot of time, hanging out with other volunteers for the movie. I traveled between the urban core of Chengdu and Ningyuan Village, which gave me another dimension of experience and reflection on the questions I have for this research and also bigger questions for my and other individuals' lives, which largely overlaps with the questions brought up by Angel and her movie. Besides physical and material support, she quickly got actors and actresses, most of whom were volunteers from Chengdu and surrounding cities. The director, An, used to be a professional actress and now has a local factory that produces furniture; actor, Niu, owns an advertising firm in Chengdu, actor, Lu, is a school teacher who teaches painting, cameraman, Wang, is a

professional photographer and cameraman. They all put aside their job and enthusiastically invested their time, ideas and even funds to this movie. Ningyuan Village was one of the settings for the movie, in which I also played a role of one who is well educated but worked in a rural herb garden, living a secluded life. In the garden she met a painter who was tired of the confusing life outside and was seeking peace and inspiration. This story was shot in the village and I enjoyed the process so much that I wished to work more for the movie. These volunteers came to the village a lot of times for the movie, and later they were all involved and volunteered to help out with the environmental education and experience programs in the village.

As presented by the text and images in this chapter, the landscape in this village is humble, without flamboyant design or large-scale changes; instead, it seems to have evolved into its present form organically. It is pleasant and enjoyable, however, to both visitors and residents. Little expertise planning or design effort was involved but village residents' efforts were put into everyday life and landscapes here. Plants, trees, fields, water, and people compose the rich and colorful landscape in the *linpan* settlement here. Each of them is entangled with all other elements and the diversity and complexity greatly add to the therapeutic features of the landscape.

Chapter 4 Individual Well-being and the Experience in the Landscape

American scholar Peggy Barlett (2005) has observed that “estrangement from the animate earth has negative consequences for human functioning. There are unanticipated benefits to collective and individual well-being with the reconnection to the natural world, an often-neglected dimension of the emerging paradigm shift toward a more sustainable society” (Barlett 2005, 2). The case of Ningyuan well supports her argument as a counter example, establishing connections between the human and natural parts of the ecosystem and improving well-being for both individuals and communities. She also observed that in the U.S. context, cases of community gardens, local food systems, and restorations of forests and prairies show that individuals often experience profound satisfactions and new forms of community and social capital are constructed, as well (Barlett 2005, 3; Mares and Peña 2010). Chinese society has experienced different patterns of social development but the Ningyuan case demonstrates the same kind of satisfaction that people can derive from the landscape and activities taking place there, which will be the main focus of this chapter.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Ningyuan Village is relatively close to Chengdu and other nearby urban areas. This closeness gives advantageous opportunity for urban-rural connection and the “urban farmers” program in the village. Chen’s family and some other farmers here have been practicing natural farming with Fukuoka’s core ideas since 2005, and have developed a reputation within the region with those who are interested in nature, healthy food, and environment issues. They are also able to provide fresh naturally grown vegetables to Chengdu, selling produce to urban residents, providing caterings for various activities taking place in their house, providing organic herbs to related communities, and so forth.

As this values-based community is established, it has also attracted urban farmers, artists, environmentalists, community-supported agriculture (CSA) organizations, urban dwellers, school children, and advocates for organic farming from domestic and international environments. The peacefulness and natural beauty, intimate physical contact with the land, the sense of community among participants, inspiration and a feeling of achievement derived from farming have been observed by participants. During my stay in Chen’s house, I participated in

activities that took place there, observed various groups' behavior, talked to people about their feelings about the village, and reflected on my own experience. This chapter will primarily discuss these individuals' perspectives on their experience, what it means to them, whether and/or how it benefits their collective well-being, and the factors that influence these experiences.

As mentioned above, "urban farmers" are people who rent a small piece of land, usually a couple of square meters, from a rural family and come to practice gardening on weekends, most of whom come from nearby cities such as Chengdu and the county seat of Jiang, or the township seat of Ningli. A community is emerging around these people as well as environmentalists, college and school students, agricultural experts and so forth. These individuals are the main informants who shared with me their experiences and opinions.

4.1 A depiction of research participants

In-depth interviews were carried out with research participants. Their background information requires introduction to provide each individuals' specific context, so their experience of the landscape and how it influences their well-being are easier to comprehend. Some participants who did not contribute so much to this research will not appear with a profile but their experience is also included.

The Chen family is the core component of this community, establishing the organic farming program and sustaining it with continuous effort in the past years. The parents (Mr. Chen and Ms. Huang) are in their sixties and still active in farming and communicating with people who visit their place. They moved to this village from a mountainous area in Sichuan, and have been living here for several decades; now they are the main people taking care of the land. The sister of Mr. Chen was a Buddhist nun and she deeply influenced this family: both are devout believers, and they became vegetarians twenty years ago which influenced their farming practice, the way they interact with patrons and visitors, and their view of life. Both look like ordinary local people but with some salient personal traits. Mr. Chen is always ready to talk, with visitors, urban farmers and family members; he has strong opinions on most topics especially ethical questions. When he talks his narrow eyes shine with confidence that comes from his belief that

he is doing the right thing to people and the land. Although he is short and skinny, he creates an authoritative presence in the house. Ms. Huang totters when she walks because of lifelong hard physical work. With her half-grey hair tied into a bun, her wrinkled face is always softly smiling and her eyes curled like crescent moons. As she aged, she suffered a partial hearing loss, so she tilts one ear toward people when she talks. Unlike most local people, including well-educated urban groups, she is able and willing to talk in standard Chinese instead of the local dialect with outsiders.⁵⁵ It is even more surprising when she talks about deep philosophical questions related to life, the environment, and moral rules.

Their eldest son, Chen, (addressed as “Brother Chen” by the community in a familiar manner), is in his early forties, and used to work as an on-site construction manager in faraway cities. He returned to the village in 2007 to take care of vegetable distribution. As he delivers vegetables to Chengdu twice a week, he is better connected with the outside world and has become the family’s spokesman; he contributes ideas on what the farming collective should do and is becoming the head of the family. With a stout physique, his round eyes cast a sly glance from time to time.

The daughter (addressed as “Sister Chen”), in her mid-thirties, is active and outgoing, with a sturdy look. Working in the sun, she has a rosy complexion and is always ready to smile. Although she did not attend college, she is equipped with certain knowledge for her herb garden, which is her main work, and is always willing to share this knowledge with people. Her son is in junior high school in the township seat, smart, tender, and quiet.

Younger Mr. Chen (addressed as “Third Brother” as he is the third in the family), a socially skillful young man in his early thirties, who used to work in Shanghai as a club manager. Although he was financially successful at that time, he felt tired and returned to this area. Now he works in Chengdu in a grocery store and comes back to the village to help with catering on

⁵⁵ The local dialect, commonly referred to as “Sichuanese”, is different from standard Mandarin and sometimes difficult to understand. Still, within the province of Sichuan, the dialect in every area varies to different extents, which adds to the difficulty for non-locals.

weekends.

We have met Lin Fan in previous chapters, the leader of a grass root environmental NGO in Chengdu, who is thoughtful and passionate about his work. Although not highly educated, his experience is rich, having served in the military, run small businesses, worked as a journalist, and finally settled down as an NGO worker. He comes to the village frequently and brings environmental education programs here. He is also active in promoting urban agriculture in housing communities in Chengdu and frequently gets seeds, seedlings and soil from the village. Lin is a long-time friend of the family. Mr. Li is a helper with Lin's education program as he used to work in a medicine factory before retirement and has expert knowledge. He grows vegetables himself at home in Chengdu.

Shuli and Fish (Fish is a nickname used by friends) are college students in Chengdu. They belong to an organization of environmental club leaders from universities in Southwest China. They participate in programs organized collectively, including on-campus gardening, weekly farming in Ningyuan and reflection and discussion sessions among their fellow environmental association leaders. Their other involvement with the village also includes introducing it to friends and purchasing produce and herb products.

May, a young mother who works in California as a film producer and is originally from Chengdu, visits the family to get safe vegetables. With a slim and delicate figure, her light skin color implies that she is from a group that is highly different from local farmers. She brought children back to China to learn the Chinese language, but is deeply concerned with food security. Seeing the field and how farmers work, she has become convinced that she will get vegetables from here, although it is not certified as organic. She has considered renting a piece of land to cultivate with her children, or to practice urban agriculture at home. Her communication with the Chen family is not only about vegetables but on a variety of issues, for instance, the future of the environment and human mind.

April, a young mother from Chengdu, loves to come and work in the field. She is always dressed in loose cotton dresses in summer, a style popular among well-educated and literary young urban women in current China, called "forest girls". She is also a frequent visitor and a long-time

friend of the family. She is a parent of a Waldorf student, another layer of her connections here. She feels drawn to this place and connected in a way that is hard to describe.

Congyi is the administrator of an institution that calls itself an “intentional community.”⁵⁶ Its headquarters is in Taiwan but the local branch is located in the rural area of Lijiang, Yunnan. This commune’s main goal is to provide people who are confused and struggle with their lives a sense of community and purpose; all the members live and work together on physical construction, farming, camping, sharing food and so forth. Congyi met the Chen family when both of them got involved in reconstruction after the earthquake in this area in 2008. This time, he came to help with an environmental experience program organized by Lin Fan.

Mr. Guo is a diligent urban farmer who works in an IT company in Chengdu on weekdays, and is highly informed and concerned with food safety, the political context, and the whole social condition. He also brings his parents and children to work, play and learn about nature.

Mr. Qian is also an IT employee from Chengdu, who farms frequently and relies almost completely on this program for food. He brings his whole family to farm to boost productivity and to serve educational goals.

I, the researcher, am a graduate student in my late twenties, staying with the family, observing and participating in their everyday life. Having been brought up in the city, I did not have much knowledge about either rural life or nature, but am a sensitive person, inclined to notice natural elements of the world. I got deeply involved in this community and became good friends with a lot of participants during this research process. Most participants do not take me as a researcher but a “volunteer” who helps with farming in this family.

⁵⁶ A commonly accepted definition of intentional communities is “a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings” (Fellowship for Intentional Community 2011).

4.2 Themes emerging from interviews

The farming family reports improved well-being after they started engaging with organic or natural farming; they indicated better health, more emotional stability and more tangible goals for life, compared to before. The Chens have not only improved their own life but also influenced other individuals who are involved in this landscape and promote their ideology. The researcher has kept a record of my own experience, which is also included in this study. Interviews show that people are more connected and enjoy better well-being to different extents.

Themes that have emerged from observation and interviews are reported in groups of physical, psychological, social, and existential well-being. Research participants' experiences and the researcher's reflections on individual well-being are grouped in these four categories.

4.2.1 Physical well-being

A Regular and Active Daily Schedule

The Chen family is the core of the organic farming group in the village. They initiated the practice and try to maintain it, having experienced the flux of the process, suspicion from the outside society, the lack of confidence from themselves, disagreement among members, and hardship from the transition between different farming practices. After eight years of coping with uncertainty and difficulties they are still positive and ambitious, using their practice as a showcase for other rural areas and their farm as a “public space” (interview with Mr. Chen, April 30, 2012) for education. Being asked how they feel after returning to organic farming, the first answer from everyone was “I am getting a healthier body.”

The family has kept a healthy lifestyle for a long time, with a regular schedule every day. Usually they get up at 6-7am in the morning, preparing breakfast for themselves and probably visitors who stay with them, and then go to work in the field. In summer, they rise earlier because the time of daylight is longer so they can work more outside. After sunset, when it is too dark to work outside, they sort out vegetables to deliver on the next day, then go to sleep after some reading or meditation.

As their time is so packed, they never enjoy trivial, meaningless entertainment, among which mah-jongg is a typical from their perspective. They have a lot of work to do—taking care of the field, providing visitors with food and water, talking to them, organizing and distributing vegetables to subscribers, assisting environmental NGOs with education programs, and so on. Mah-jongg as an entertaining activity and a way of gambling has been popular in southwest China for a century and is known as the signature image of Sichuan. It is also considered a reflection of Sichuanese' well-known optimism and the acceptance of fate.

However, the Chen family resists this idea of unmindful entertainment and prefers a healthy, sober and productive life. Ms. Huang gave me negative examples of neighbors in the village who have no time for their family because of playing mah-jongg all the time; an extreme case involved a neighbor who played mah-jongg all day long and died from a stroke when he bent over to pick up a mah-jongg tile that was dropped on the floor. "Sitting there for a whole day playing mah-jongg will bring you nothing other than high blood pressure, heart disease, and obesity," said Mr. Chen (interview on April 28, 2012), with a determined negative tone. They consider this kind of lifestyle not only a waste of time but also extremely unhealthy either for themselves or for their family. Instead, they enjoy physical work in the field and reading before going to bed, both of which help them to sleep well. In April 2012, a group of American high school students who were doing community service in Chen's house, expressed their hope of learning mah-jongg; they were refused flatly, but, instead, were offered the opportunity of learning Chinese chess. "Mah-jongg could not enter my door; they can go to other families if they really want to learn mah-jongg," said Mr. Chen, assertively.

The family is also very much into nutritional studies and regimen. Chinese medicine and related classic works like the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* are an important part of their reading. Sister Chen's teenage son understands the importance of a healthy lifestyle well, considering fast foods as "junk." She started studying and growing herbs several years ago, and is now selling potted herbs and essential oils that she extracts using simple instruments.

Physical Exercise and Clean Air

According to the interviews I did with my research participants, the main reasons why urban

farmers are attracted to this program include weekend recreation, clean air, safe food, and children's education; these themes appear in almost all interviews and constitute the main motivations of engaging in farming. Almost every urban farmer who I spoke to mentioned the importance of getting out of the heavy, dirty, urban air and entertaining themselves in the more pleasant, rural landscape and enjoying clean air. Also, the idea of getting physical exercise is considered one of the program's major incentives.

“Well, on weekends you have to have some entertainment. Compared to playing ping-pong or something like that, this gives you products. And you feel safe eating these.”
(Interview with Yan, May 5, 2012)

“One reason (for me to do farming here) is food safety; the other is that I feel it fun. Actually when you stay in the city for long you need to get out for exercise and get access to nature. For those who have kids they get educated too. Food sold in the market is really unsafe.” (Interview with Gong, May 12, 2012)

“When I started (farming here) I really only thought this is entertainment. But you have to find something to do on weekends, and this is the healthiest. It's also exercise.”
(Interview with Mr. Qian, May 5, 2012)

“Gardening is the anchorage of hopes for many elderly people; otherwise, they would feel themselves useless after retirement. I know several of them who sat there all day long and in two or three years they died...But those who garden would get clear air and sunshine outside; they are no longer afraid of getting a cold, and some of them recovered from heart disease and high blood pressure.” (Interview with Mr. Li, April 28, 2012)

“It's a good way of recreation, relaxing on weekends; the air here is very good. The air in Chengdu is very unsatisfying... every weekend I just come here without thinking about anything—about work, and it's very relaxing. I've been used to this.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 5, 2012)

Food safety and health has become such a consuming issue in China that some people get

anxious and even paranoid about it. It seems that everything could be fake or poisonous: fake eggs, fake soy sauce, poisonous milk powder... with the worsening pollution and increasing rate of “modern diseases” such as high blood sugar, obesity, diabetes, heart diseases, stroke, and all kinds of cancer, people pay more attention to physical health. The withdrawal of publicly-supported health care pushed the responsibilities to the private sector, mostly individuals (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). Adding to health-care concerns were the unsound insurance system and unsatisfying service provided by medical institutions.⁵⁷ It is not surprising that physical exercise, safe food and bodily health would be key preoccupations of urban farmers.

Compared to these urban people, however, most long-term farmers don’t take farming as recreation or a healing activity, but as a means for an income that they may not enjoy. Sister Li, a neighbor villager and helper with Sister Chen in her herb garden, employs a much more instrumental perspective of farming. Talking about farming she said, “What fun? It is only for livelihood. I would enjoy going to the streets (shopping in the township seat) much better.” (Interview on April 27, 2012) She does not agree with the Chens’ idea of improved physical health by organic farming and vegetarian diet, considering all their family members “unhappy” because “their family cannot have meat.” Thus, it would be helpful to distinguish between the instrumental and the appreciating attitudes and practice of farming when conceptualizing therapeutic landscapes and its potential association with well-being.

Mistrust of the System and the Care of the Self

Concerning the environment and safe foods, there is a deep mistrust of the government and institutions, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Urban farmers here question the motivation of governmental effort on environmental protection, as it requires long-term investment while government officials get promoted or moved in fairly short periods of time. So-called environmental protection is interpreted as either a show on the surface or completely neglected. Other urban farmers claim that they farm here because they do not trust anyone else but only

⁵⁷ The relationship between patients and medical care providers have been getting notoriously tense in the past one or two years, which is another reflection of the unsatisfactory medical care situation.

themselves:

“(Talking about benefits of farming here) first I feel more assured with food safety. This is the most basic aspect of our life. Then it’s for recreation. I got to know friends here, too. Besides, I agree with the environmental idea (they promote here). I think to get more people participating will help with our bigger environment. It is very difficult to rely on the current system to improve the environment...Currently what they do is only on the surface as a performance, not considering the environment in the long run.” (Interview with Mr. Guo, May 5, 2012)

This gentleman works closely with the government so probably has a better grasp of undisclosed information than average individuals, but his opinion reflects the prevalent ideas on the environment and the concern over food safety. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there have been major food poisoning or pollution public incidents in the past a few years that were nationally influential (Yan 2013). Other than these incidents that terrified the whole country, local food safety issues are numerous. As the result, the looming anxiety on this issue can be easily triggered and spread.

Besides, some consumers are well informed that certified organic foods cannot be trusted as the whole system is corrupted and pretty much everybody can get certified as long as they pay for it and have connections in relevant institutions. Chen’s vegetables are not certified but subscribers have confidence in their soil and way of farming.

“Primarily I think it’s safe to eat (vegetables grown here). My family usually doesn’t buy vegetables; but when we do, every time I would be concerned about how much chemical is used.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 5, 2012)

As depicted in research participants’ profiles, May, the young mother who works in California as a film producer and is originally from Chengdu, visits the family to get safe vegetables.

“The Chinese context is dangerous for kids; transportation is disordered, education is messy, and especially food... The foods sold outside are far from assuring and I can’t

give them to my daughters. I have to do something about it.” (Interview with May, May 12, 2012)

These individuals are also well informed that big companies control the supply chain of foods nationally, if not globally. Once there is a section in the chain polluted or corrupted, there is a huge impact on public health in a broad scale.

Within this context of mistrust, these urban farmers chose to do something about it—acting and taking care of themselves, by self-producing food in relatively safe soil. Individual action becomes paramount to protect the self and to get better food, a sense of security, and psychological assurance.

4.2.2 Psychological Well-Being

The benefits of farming are not limited to physical well-being. Psychological improvement is discussed frequently in interviews, and is also closely related to rapid urbanization, economic disparity and current Chinese society.

A Sense of Equality and Acceptance as Opposed to the Social Hierarchy

As discussed in Chapter 2, China’s unprecedented economic development has also brought inequality in the distribution of wealth and other resources, especially between urban and rural sectors of the society. Social differences created by the urban-rural disparity add to the prevalent stress that exists in the collective unconsciousness and affects individuals’ well-being in various ways. The healing of the social split is also reflected in the farming program: informants report that they feel more accepted and treated more equally when they work with the land instead of with people. Barlett (2005, 5) pointed out that “modernity celebrates the transcendence of older forms of boundedness to place, embracing technology, rationality, and control over nature as a means to development and personal success” and the city is a place where power is established and the lower class is disadvantaged in the social hierarchy, however the vastness of nature balances the humanly created system and provides a sense of equality.

“I grew up in a rural environment and used to be very outgoing. However in high school

it was like a school for privileged; many classmates are from wealthy families and their lifestyle, consuming behavior and value system were so different and I felt myself not accepted but excluded... I closed myself off. But nature is so embracing and I felt myself healed by farming..." (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

It is also reflected in the Chens' spirit: all of them are highly proud of their work and feel mostly confident with their peasant identity. They all agree that this organic farming program does not only provide knowledge but also bridges the urban and the rural sectors, revealing to urban people that farmers are not all badly educated or illiterate, that farmers have their aspirations and interests in life too, and more important, they have knowledge and experience that are important for the urban sector's survival. By catering to visitors who come for experience and knowledge and giving talks to universities and other institutions, their self-esteem is largely promoted. They have also been interviewed by TV stations in Chengdu and the central media from Beijing for their progressive practice of agriculture.

Getting Focused and Mentally Peaceful

As in the western context, Simmel (1997) argues that urban life is so full of stimulants that people have to shut down their senses to protect themselves, and in this way they get numb or insensitive. And the farming environment serves as a counter balance to slow down and appease the mind.

"I like to weed as it makes me focused and my mind pure—it keeps me from thinking about anything else." (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

"I feel myself very peaceful and simple, not like working in the office, dealing with a lot of problems and relationships. I don't need to care about those on weekends." (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 19, 2012)

E. F. Schumacher has contended that good work should be meaningful and good for the soul, instead of meeting the requirement of industrial development and instrumentalizing people (Schumacher 1979). In this sense, farming work better serves this purpose for confused and

exhausted urban dwellers.

Connecting to the Land

There has been a substantial amount of research on the importance of connecting to nature or the land, and its influence on human well-being, including physical, mental, and spiritual (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Ulrich 1999). For instance, "...related research shows that gardeners feel connected to larger forces not quite under human control. We could describe this reflective mode as the garden's spiritual dimension." (Helphand 2006, 14) From this research it is observable that connecting to nature is also a significant element that contributes to better well-being in the Ningyuan case. The mysterious energy from the land, being amazed or awed by nature, and similar themes repeatedly appear in interviews.

"It gives me a chance to get closer to nature." (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

The informant is a college girl majoring in Chinese language and literature, looking smart and peaceful. She speaks in a soft manner, and moves lightly around. She participates in a student's club focusing on environmental issues and became a leader of it. Leaders of environmental organizations from different colleges are organized into a farming program in this village and she comes on a regular basis with peers. Besides this, she is also involved in an on-campus planting program and does daily farming work near her dorm on campus. She could be considered a representative as a young, educated person in this community.

"It was a rainy day and I got up early in the morning to take care of the vegetables. The first flower from the sunflower plant just came out and I was the first to see it! Another morning I was expecting it to bloom as it looked like it would, and at noon all were blooming!" (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

Fish, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is another college environmental association leader, and he has similar ideas on farming and the relationship with nature.

"[On the question of why he feels happy with farming] from my perspective, in school [my life] feels blundering. Being away from the noisy steel and concrete environment and

calming myself down in nature is the so-called happiness derived from working, I think.”

Asked what he meant by “blundering” and specific examples of blundering city life and the peaceful feeling in nature and how nature calms him down, he said,

“For example, in school we have various kinds of activities, but many of them are like tasks that have to be finished, like those organized by departments and the student union. Sometimes I’m not interested at all but teachers would force us to participate. Sometimes you don’t know if you need it, but follow the general trend aimlessly. Besides, there is a lot of stress in school, like social relationships, exams, and so forth. All these elements intertwine together and freak people out if you don’t have a clear goal. But nature has the magic of calming people down, no matter if you want to spend time with friends, or experience growing plants, or harvest your products.”

He also expressed his fondness for the village environment, as “there’s nothing unfavorable about the environment here. We all like it. Every time when we enter the village we would comment enthusiastically that it is so pleasant here and we want to live in such a place.”

However this comprehensive landscape is “hard to analyze (what elements made it so pleasant)... It’s a subtle feeling and I don’t know how to describe it specifically. It’s pleasant to farm with friends; the clear air in nature is pleasant; the feeling of touching the soil with my hands is pleasant; it’s comfortable to see sweet kids in the field; it’s delightful to harvest the vegetables I grew myself; it’s pleasant to sweat...”

April, a young mother from Chengdu, loved to come and work in the fields. She had not been here for two months when I met her and the field even “appeared in my dream” (interview May 19, 2012). She feels herself somehow deeply connected to this land and these people, even in a magical way. She appreciates the fact that the air is cleaner than in the city and people are nice, especially to kids. In the two months when they were absent from the field six marrow squashes got ready to be picked which is a lot of food for an urban family. She felt she didn’t make any effort but nature is so generous to offer her food. She felt greatly thankful to this mysterious energy of life.

“At first several friends rented a piece of land here and farmed, and we observed their farming; then we started doing it too. Talking about benefits from here, for me it’s very subtle and kind of mysterious...I feel getting power from the land as I’m connected to nature and the land; just thinking about standing on your feet on the land...my connection with this piece of land is very deep—I dreamed of coming here twice, and every time when I am here I feel like coming home. It calms me down compared to the blundering world outside. The pace of the society is too quick, but coming here I can slow down and calm down. The work in the outside world is all about here (pointing to her head) but here we step on the land and do a very solid work with our hands. The soil here is really nice... I feel we should be thankful to the land and the soil, and she’ll give us back. We have not come for two weeks and weeds have appeared in our field, but our marrow squashes grew up any way... the whole process is slow; the society is too eager for quick success and instant benefits, but here we have to respect the pace of nature, which is slow and cannot be changed. Here I learned to be patient and feel awe for nature.”

My own reflections are largely around this theme of being immersed in nature too:

“Every time I go to Ningyuan village from the nearby city of Chengdu, as soon as I approach the township seat by bus, stretches of farmland and greenness appear before my eyes, and upstanding trees alongside the road cast cool shadows, which calms me down. The whole space turns less noisy compared to the urban area of Chengdu, and the greenness makes me feel peaceful. After several days outside in the city, I feel like at home once I get back.” (Field notes on May 15, 2012)

“Living in the village and observing is a touching and subtle experience. The time of sunrise and sunset is different every day; in the spring daytime gets longer and longer; the temperature of noon time is higher and higher, and farmers go to the field later and later in the afternoon to avoid the scorching sun; plants in the field are alternating: potatoes are being harvested, marrow squash is the next, and then there is tomato and eggplant... The season transforms quietly, but all natural elements tell us the change, as long as our senses are openly working.” (Field notes on May 4, 2012)

“I helped taking rape seeds from dried plants and digging out potatoes from the soil. Digging potatoes makes my mind focused and avoided disorderly and irrelative thoughts. To avoid breaking potatoes, I must be very careful using the digging tool, in which way I generated the consideration of care for vegetables.” (Field notes on May 20, 2012)

Malpas (2011, 14) argues that “to experience a landscape is to be active within it, since it is by means of such activity that landscape affects and influences us. Understanding landscapes means understanding the forms of action out of which they arise, to which they give expression, and to which they may also contribute.” In this case, the bodily movement and engagement with the land and nature in this landscape give meaning to the physical space and deepens the experience. For instance, how many peanut seeds can be planted in one row, how many steps we take to finish a round of watering, and how many potatoes we can dig out in one piece of land, all of which could be otherwise experienced in a shallow and quick way. Besides, not only the landscape is shaped by human activities of farming, “but the human is itself shaped by landscape, and neither has the upper hand in this relationship—each is appropriated by and to the other.” (Malpas 2011, 17)

“Living a life according to the rule of nature is something I never had any concept of; but here I can see the turning of seasons: last week we harvested marrow squash and cabbage, and this week is eggplant; in a few weeks we’ll have tomatoes and cucumbers... the time of sunrise and sunset differs every day; in early June rice is planted and the whole landscape is changed: the sky is reflected on the surface of the paddy field, the beauty of which is charming for me. Several weeks ago I helped with planting peanut seeds and only now I see some little sprouts; sure enough, we cannot be impatient when we work with the land and nature.” (Field notes on May 21, 2012)

“After staying in the village for several weeks, I found the city strange and distanced. I returned to Chengdu for filming the movie, and every time I saw some landscaping grass or plants on brown fields, I felt familiar and intimate. But paved land, high rises, and the noise of transportation made me feel illusory; I know they’re built upon an illusory foundation and cannot sustain and renew themselves. I felt the city huge and scary; the

cemented ground and steel concrete buildings separated me from the land and nature. This separation from the land deprived me of the feeling of being grounded and secure. Gigantic human-made systems, for instance the transportation system and high-rises dominate the city and makes me feel a loss of control and disorientation. I feel myself dwindled, powerless and scared.” (Field notes on May 15, 2012)

“Staying in the village makes me realize a different perspective of time, life and death. The family keeps several vegetarian dogs, who are friendly and peaceful. One of the newly born died at a misty dusk, and Ms. Chen practiced some Buddhist ritual for him and wished him good future in the next life. He looked peaceful. Looking at his body, I strongly felt the power of nature; life and death are just natural; life comes and goes, but in cities and the so-called civilized places, we tried so hard to hide this most basic truth of the world. But here, life manifests itself naturally in the background of uncovered land and nature. Funerals are often heard too, and people don’t feel strange or surprised with it, because it is just natural. I was shocked by this new realization and fell in deep contemplation.” (Field notes on May 17, 2012)

Yi-Fu Tuan (1998) argues that the built environment, from basic shelters to splendid cities, basically is a way to escape from nature into “culture.” Escapism, however, is not the better way to live our human lives as morality can only grow out of the respect for the real (Tuan 1989, 10). The urban environment isolates people from most natural elements and produces an environment that is least influenced by nature as possible; the heating system keeps indoor temperature almost the same all year round, paved ground prevents people from touching soil and the land, and most plants and animals are excluded from the urban environment. People would like to avoid pondering on some heavier issues like life and death, however, in this case, these elements are naturally presented in front of the eyes and reveal a bigger truth that is more real.

The Feeling of Being Independent, Grounded and Empowered

As discussed above, the illusive feeling of freedom and also the terror of neoliberalism leave people, especially the youth, anxious and powerless. As a result, they have little interest in political issues—all their attention is paid to seeking a job, securing their positions in the social

hierarchy, and coping with difficulties of living in a big city,⁵⁸ in a word, struggling for individual survival and success.

The accumulated stresses of urban existence have triggered increased crime rates in cities. Assaults, accidents and thefts have become serious social issues. Yao Jiaxin, a polite and skilled music student killed a youth he hit with his car; a frustrated middle-aged man went to a kindergarten and committed a mass killing; Yang Jia, being treated unfairly by some police officers, dashed into a police station with a knife, leaving six of them dead and five injured.⁵⁹

The escalating stress is also reflected in contemporary fiction and films. For example, Jia Zhang-ke's latest movie *A Touch of Sin* (2013) narrated four stories of desperate rural and urban young people.

“Jia sees his country as suffering a brutal new cultural revolution of money-worship in which a cronyist elite has become super-rich in the liquidation of state assets, creating poisonous envy in the dispossessed. Different strands, characters and stories emerge, building up a cracked picture of China as a Wild East of lawless violence and cynicism. A worker explodes with anger at how the mine chief has somehow been able to afford a sports car. The unhappiness of three brothers erupts in violence: one casually slays three guys who have attempted to rob him on the road. Another reveals himself to be an ice-cool armed robber who doesn't scruple to murder women in cold blood for their designer bags. Yet another is having an affair with a sauna receptionist and this also ends in a bloody confrontation.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “Gongzuo, jinqian, anquangan: zhongguo nianqingren xunzhao weilai” 工作、金钱、安全感-中国年轻人寻找未来. [Jobs, money, and a sense of security: young Chinese people searching for a future]. *Deutsche Welle Chinese Version*, December 3, 2012. <http://www.dw.de/%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E9%87%91%E9%92%B1%E5%AE%89%E5%85%A8%E6%84%9F-%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%B9%B4%E8%BD%BB%E4%BA%BA%E5%AF%BB%E6%89%BE%E6%9C%AA%E6%9D%A5/a-15804016>.

⁵⁹ “Ma Jiajue, Yang Jia, Li Qiming, Yao Jiaxin, jilule shidai bianqian de shangtong” 马加爵、杨佳、李启铭、药家鑫，记录了时代变迁的伤痛. [Ma Jiajue, Yang Jia, Li Qiming, and Yao Jiaxin recorded the trauma from the changing era]. *Zhonghua luntan*, June 8, 2011. http://club.china.com/data/thread/1011/2726/86/98/5_1.html.

⁶⁰ Peter Bradshaw. “A Touch of Sin review – ‘A shotgun blast at the dark heart of modern China’.” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/15/a-touch-of-sin-review-jia-zhang-ke-china>.

In contrast to this gloomy reality of anxiety, anger and inferior holistic well-being, this research on people's experience of individual well-being, derived from the urban farmers program, environmental education series, outreach to urban communities, and other activities emplaced or expanded from this village implies relevance and significance.

As mentioned above, food safety and the lack of trust of institutions are among the most important driving forces of farming for food in this case. Correspondingly, there is a need of the psychological status of being independent beyond material security.

“You feel very assured to eat these vegetables, which are your own fruits of hard work.”

(Interview with Mr. Yan, May 5, 2012)

Lin Fan, the environmental leader's reflection is impressive and profound in many ways:

“I started farming half a year ago—now I feel peaceful and surefooted after I started doing farming work. This society is full of various relationships, such as the relationship with bosses, coworkers, family members, friends, and so forth, and people have the feeling of fear, afraid of being abandoned by others in the relationship, because we feel ourselves incomplete or inadequate and cannot support ourselves or live by ourselves. Furthermore, in these relationships we instrumentalize ourselves, utilizing ourselves as tools to achieve some kind of goals, mostly for survival. And in this way, we feel ourselves powerless, having to rely on other parts in relationships to survive. But when I saw the plant, the food I grew, I had this moment of enlightenment—actually we are completely secured because nature gives us everything we need. Even if I'm abandoned in all relationships, I still have food and sustenance. I don't have to be afraid of these anymore. Moreover, I got this idea of equality—human beings are lives from nature, just the same as any other lives, be it animals or plants. We took ourselves too seriously and too important. Now I can think less about myself and let it go. At that moment I felt real peace.”

“My insight from growing vegetables is that nothing is created by human beings; the whole world is given to us, given by nature. The air, the water, the sunshine; they are all

the manifest of the divine. Wild herbs and fruits are given by nature and not cultivated by human beings. Human beings can only discover something but not create. We are small; social phenomena are all constructed by human beings and are delusive. We rely on these elements, like work, income, social status, and relationship, to acquire a feeling of security, but it is not a fundamental way. Now I realized that seeking harmony with nature, the great creator, is the foundation of our survival. I used to depend on these elements too; I lived under somebody's roof, didn't accept myself, lacked a security of material wealth, and didn't get along well with my parents; now it's all cured. Planting is an activity that grounds us, because we physically contact the soil, the land, and nature... we are afraid and attached to social relationship because we feel ourselves incomplete and need to be accepted and afraid to be abandoned in relationships. Actually everyone is complete and divine; I realized this from farming. We feel ourselves powerless because we need some income to sustain our life; but actually nothing is produced by our human society; we get our food from nature, who is so generous that doesn't require anything from us. As long as we are connected to nature, there is nothing to worry about. I know from farming that we can sustain ourselves and don't need to rely on anybody or institution..."

Lin's experience and reflections well explain how he copes with difficulties, confusion, dependency and lack of security. His articulation is even beyond psychological well-being and close to a spiritual or existential homecoming, which brings joy, peace, and freedom.

A Feeling of Accomplishment

Low self-worth and self-respect is a prevalent problem that exists among not only peasants, as observed in my interview, shown in the case at the beginning of Chapter 2, but also among urban residents. A sense of happiness and accomplishment seems particularly difficult to achieve. Scholars point out that other than the rationale of economics, the emphasis on "face" or honor impacts the sense of happiness in an embedded way. According to a report released in 2001, the whole of East Asia enjoys relatively low satisfaction of life, even lower than some low-income countries such as Nigeria, India, and Pakistan; the researcher pointed out that the culture and

education of East Asian obstructed people's pursuing of self-worth and happiness (Ng 2002).

The University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (UIUC) Psychology Department carried out an investigation on positive attitudes and satisfaction in 2005 and China got the lowest score. Self-esteem or respect is an important component of subjective well-being, but the study shows that external evaluation and recognition largely decides self-values, which largely relies on a sense of superiority that results from comparing the self with others (Jiang 2012). As a result, the heavy burden of competition in the society is transmitted through chains on the hierarchy, and ultimately born by the weakest group—children and teenagers, who sit on the bottom of the hierarchy (Zhu 2013). Moreover, the fixed social value system makes free choice challenging. In the Chinese case, people believe that they have to engage in the competition and opting out is not quite an option, and this lack of free choice also negatively influences people's well-being (Cohen and Emanuel 2014).

At the same time, even the more well-off side of the social hierarchy—white collar workers—feel “empty” in this system because they're deprived of any time other than working time and have to give up interests, hobbies, and thinking. This results in a negative cycle that the more time and energy we spend on material wealth and work, the more we believe in the homogenous value system of material success, specifically, self-worth, identity, and self-esteem all depend on the position in the socio-economic hierarchy (Zhu 2013). A survey in Hong Kong demonstrates that the desire for material wealth negatively influences people's psychological well-being (Sing 2009).

In the Ningyuan case, however, a more positive sense of accomplishment and psychological satisfaction even beyond self-esteem emerged in interviews. Most interviewees mentioned a profound feeling of accomplishment and how that lifted their spirits when seeing vegetables growing and harvesting, and “the process of thinking and planning reduces physical tiredness.” (Interview with Fish, May 28, 2012)

“There are achievements and joy, like harvesting and seeing plants growing. And it is a good way to educate children.” (Interview with Mr. Guo, May 5, 2012)

“Sowing seeds, taking care of the seedlings, and harvesting is a process of breeding; the feeling is like seeing a child growing; the happiness is light but very solid and grounded; it’s hard to describe it...” (Interview with April, May 13, 2012)

This feeling of accomplishment has nothing to do with competition or envious gaze from others but purely the process of the embodied engaging with nature; it is derived from nature and does not rely on social relationships, which implies that it is more self-sufficient, long-lasting, accessible and stable than most other positive coping skills. In addition, as discussed in the following paragraphs, the social aspects of farming also has profound influence on human well-being.

Memory of Childhood or Youth

For a lot of people farming is an avenue that brings back sweet memories of childhood or youth. This feeling of going home and tracing back pleasant old days is apparent for many participants in this program.

“At home we have a little garden in front of the house, and my dad grows a lot of flowers there. When I go home in summer vacation we eat melons, and in winter there is spinach... I feel it (having food from our own backyard) safe and secured. My dad is fond of growing plants, and I got this interest from him.” (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

A group of urban farmers in their fifties were once “intellectuals sent down to the countryside” (or “the sent-down generation”) in Mao’s era. They met each other in the rural area and now although living in the city, they long for the rural and friendship in the old days. So they rent a piece of land in the village collectively and go to farm every weekend, which is both recreation, working, retrieving memories, and getting together with old friends.

“We are all ‘intellectual youth’ that were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution--The last batch. We have an emotion toward the land. We stayed in the rural [areas] for three years when we were very young, younger than you are. It’s very

different from your staying here. Our emotion is accumulated by day and night.

It's also different from farmers' attachment to the land; it is livelihood for them but a period of personal growth for us. Now people don't have emotion toward land anymore... actually the Communists won the civil war not for the 'New China' but the soldiers fought for their land. Our emotion toward the land was connected with scarcity and hunger; if we didn't work we would have been starving. There was no other job; so we went to the countryside. We got to understand the rural and farming. Like this lady (pointing to one of their peers) was the example in our village."

"This place connects our hearts; usually we get together every month; we think about coming and having a look from time to time. So we don't expect a lot of harvesting but a place to get together. But our getting together is not playing mahjong or drinking, which are the fashion of Chengdu. But getting here we communicate with words."

"We are from northern China, followed the military and the railroad and settled in Chengdu. We grew up in the same the work unit system (*danwei*, an integrated unit of work and life), went to the same elementary school, the same middle school and went to the countryside together (and that's why we are so attached to each other)."

"We enjoy more about the process than the fruit. So how the vegetables are is not that important. We are different from those who come every week and take care of the land very well... our experience is different." (Interview with the four urban farmers, May 19, 2012)

Other Themes Related to Psychological Well-Being

On a subtler level, comparing to the relatively numb everyday experience especially in the city, some people feel themselves more alive in nature.

"I got a sense of my being; I feel myself really alive, when I see the plants growing, and there is some kind of change every day... However in our daily life, we're so isolated from nature and change and can't perceive our being anymore (*yishi budao zijide*

cunzai)." (Interview with April, May 13, 2012)

Compared to nature, the city is a more humanly controlled ecosystem, in which a lot of natural processes are blocked from urban dwellers' view. Air conditioning dampens seasonal changes by keeping indoor temperature stable; paved roads and concrete buildings and other structures cover the soil and keep wildlife away; most foods can be purchased in grocery stores at any time of the year, so urban residents lose the sense of seasonal cycle of plants. All these efforts try to mitigate or even eliminate natural changes, so that people would not need to face them. However, while having an easier time dealing with altering situations, the living world is blocked from perception at the same time. Being exposed to changes in nature is an access to reality and wonder, and in this sense is deeply therapeutic.

Learning knowledge is another theme that was frequently mentioned by research participants. Being surprised or awed by the greater force of nature, learning becomes an important component of urban farmers' experience. Most of them grew up in the city and hadn't had a deep understanding of the natural system. Most research participants talk about learning knowledge in the farming process, either from farmers in the village or in other permaculture classes for farming. One of the concerns of visitors who desire to rent a piece of land and start farming is the lack of agricultural knowledge, but fellow urban farmers would encourage them to learn in the process of trying and practicing.

"I didn't know that plants' lives are so strong... I used to have no knowledge of in-season or out-of-season vegetables, but now I'm getting to learn it. We went to take courses in permaculture and got so much knowledge." (Interview with Shuli, May 12, 2012)

"I never knew that there is no distinction between 'useful insects' and 'pests'; the ecosystem is a whole and it's only human beings that label them ignorantly; I never knew the story of tomatoes—they originated in Mexico and other areas in South America, and the story of how they got to China. It is just amazing that our everyday foods have such complicated histories... it was quite an experience for me, having broadened my view." (Reflections of Li Jing, a participant of the environmental experiencing program, May 26,

2012)

Psychologists consider awe and wonder as facilitators of positive or even peak experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; James 1994). New knowledge, the wonder from nature, could potentially challenge the existing conceptual system, broaden people's perspective, and generate new excitement and possibilities. Therefore as mentioned by the research participant, exploring the natural and agricultural world is one wholesome experience that farming activity and agricultural landscape bring for people.

The role of being alone or reclusive in nature is also mentioned by informants.

“I've never been very interested in mundane life, and farming gives me a chance to be with myself. I especially dislike social life nowadays and want to escape from it. I like the feeling of going to the field and taking care of the vegetables on my own. Farming also makes it possible to be distanced from everyday life...and gradually I found myself transformed by these activities...” (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

Although people have the need to have social connections, company, and communities, it can be seen from this case that time and space for solitary contemplation are necessary and beneficial when social situations are consuming or stressful. The stability, peace, and quiet time that nature and plants offer could be therapeutic and wholesome.

Other than describable feelings, emotions, and themes of improved psychological well-being, overall there are still certain larger or more general benefits that the landscape offers. For more people the benefits of farming cannot be easily described but just attract them to go there every week.

“I just feel good when I go to the village every weekend. I don't know why, but I just feel good...” (Interview with Fish, May 28, 2012)

This ineffable positive feeling is vague and abstract yet is real and beneficial, so that it keeps people coming to the field, continuing their farming work, and engaging with the community. It might be the integration of specific positive emotions that comprise a comprehensive

healthy psychological state. It might be some specific feelings that are beyond our current language. It might also be deeper emotions that people have not yet specified or identified. The fact that it cannot be specified, however, doesn't compromise its influence on people's psychological well-being, and it is worth further in-depth exploration by both researchers and research participants.

4.2.3 Social Well-Being

Community, interaction with people and social support are considered important for individual health (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and World Resources Institute 2003). Empirical data analysis shows that social relationships and community support are correlated to not only mental health but also morbidity and mortality (Holt-Lunstad et.al 2010). As mentioned in Chapter 2, Scholars pointed out for western urbanization in earlier history that loneliness and disruption of community, rate of change, competition and lack of security (Howarth 1976; Levy and Visotsky 1969) tended to cause inferior states of mental health. While forced to contact a large number of people and rapidly changing phenomena, real physical contact and connection decrease. Although the dependence on each other increases, the division of labor and specialization result in the lack of community and retreating back to family and individuals (Clapp 1978).

A research on social capital shows that it is closely related to individual well-being, where social capital is composed of social trust, norms, network, and social structure. East Asia ranks relatively low in the world according to this study (Lee et al. 2011). Contemporary Chinese society verifies these theories, given the similar context of economic development, earlier stage of urbanization and the rapid change of social structures. Interviews suggest that farming together provides a way to know people and stay connected, which largely benefits social well-being for individuals.

The Joy of Sharing and Connecting to People

Mr. Li worked as a medical researcher for several decades and has retired. When he was working in the medicine production factory he planted fruit trees and flowers on open factory space to clear the air, and colleagues from all over the country came to visit his garden, which gave him

tremendous confidence and pride. After retiring, he has grown various vegetables and bamboos around his apartment building. The moment of sharing foods with neighbors is his favorite, such as radishes and pumpkins.

“We shared the product of growing lettuce on campus, and made so many friends in permaculture classes... we have a ‘happy farm’ on campus, where some elderly ladies claimed a piece of land to grow their vegetables (actually the land was theirs and the university didn’t want that piece). They want to go to their old land to grow something there. It’s good to run into them, and I feel pleasant with them. Sharing food with others is also a delightful experience.” (Interview with Shuli, May 19, 2012)

As depicted in the participants’ profiles, Congyi is the administrator of an intentional community working on healing minds and spirits of confused and frustrated people. He has been a good friend with the Chen family and came in May 2012 to help with an environmental experience program that was hosted in the village.

“Working with these people, constructing, building, and growing, I realized that we cannot live alone; we’re a part of the human society, as well as the ecosystem. We have to live in harmony with the human community and the eco community.” (Interview with Congyi, May 26, 2012)

More people talk about their connection to this core family, which seems a very important component in this whole landscape and connected relationship.

“I like the Chen family. They are honest, warm and harmonious. They don’t fuss about benefits or money and treat people well, so I want to be kind to them too. But it’s different in the city; if I take a cent from you I have to return it. But the Chen family is different. So I’m willing to hang out with them. They’re always like this so people know them; no one would take extra advantage. And it is so true that people feel better when they give more to each other. Eventually no one loses anything.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 12, 2012)

Mr. Qian, who works as a computer engineer in Chengdu, also expressed his fondness for friends who introduced this program to him, and friends he made in the farming process:

“I met quite some friends here, several families. Like Mr. Y who is a lawyer, a friend I got to know here. The friendship you made here is simple; there is not a complicated relationship that you need to worry about... when we get back we also contact each other and help each other when it’s needed. The friendship built up here is more solid; at first, we didn’t know about their jobs and only talked about the vegetables, and only got to know the details later. It’s less utilitarian concern of making friends here.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 12, 2012)

Besides, most people started participating in the program through introductions from friends; some of them are from the same company and others have gotten to know new friends after getting back to the city. For instance, the vivid scene of the Fu and Yang couples chatting, working together and helping each other at the beginning of this dissertation is moving and impressive to the researcher.

Educating Children, Bridging Different Generations

Educating children is one of the most important reasons for coming to the village for adult participants. Children, one of the most important social bonds of individuals and families, benefit from the program and parents, too. As most kids from middle-class families are forced to learn painting, piano, calligraphy, ballet, and so on, farming is a new way of early stage education of knowledge and world view.

“As he (the son) is not going to elementary school yet, it’s for him to have an experience and a sense of the environment—can’t be too profound. At least when he grows up he’ll have a memory of working on the land, knowing these plants, and what (agricultural work) is like. He’ll know that environmentally friendly products are good for people. He plays with the soil, removing weeds, and so on. But at least he sees the process of vegetables growing.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 12, 2012)

“She likes to play with dirt. It was for her that we rented this piece of land here...for her to play with dirt. And she likes digging the soil. And she never gets bored.” (Interview with Ms. Tang, May 19, 2012)

It also provides a chance of connecting different generations especially between grandparents and grandchildren. The image of the whole joint family working together in the field, chatting with smiles and helping each other inspires the other participants.

4.2.4 Existential Well-Being

Existential well-being indicates the situation of people’s life status in the world—the goal and meaning of life--what is the anchorage, the deeply-rooted beliefs, what makes them resilient when facing difficulties, and so on. From observation and interviews, natural farming in this case is beneficial to improve existential well-being to some extent too.

The Core Family’s View

The Chen family cannot be overlooked when discussing existential well-being. The whole family felt healthier and more confident after turning to organic farming, and considers what they are doing not only a way of making living for themselves or providing safe food for their customers, but also as a way to gather people, promote communication and educate the public. In sum, they take their role as serving the society as a whole.

Having moved here in 1968 from another county⁶¹ in the same province, they were at first discriminated as outsiders and lived a hard life. However, they learned how to keep themselves honest, hard-working, and optimistic during hard times, which also helped them in the first several years of organic farming (interview with Mr. Chen, April 28, 2012). Another reason for their positive attitude is that they are serious Buddhists, strongly believing in doing good and being frank.

⁶¹ In the Chinese administrative system a county is much smaller than the American counterpart. The size is more like a city in the US.

In contrast to their previous hardship and inferior status, the Chen Family is highly aware of their role in the society, or their life goal of being in the world or cosmos. They are interested in Buddhist philosophy, firmly believing in doing good to others and being honest people. With this backbone that supported them in past difficult times, they feel accomplished and satisfied with the current situation without a large amount of wealth but enriched with work and spiritual life. They are particularly proud of their home and land as a “public place” (interview with Mr. Chen, April 30, 2012) for environmental education and a community center. Different from the mah-jongg players, they have little leisure time but appreciate this lifestyle. They are rigorous vegetarians because of their belief; while being considered “unhappy” because they do not eat meat, their sense of satisfaction can be easily felt.

Here the interesting contrast between urban and rural diseases is noticeable: urban residents suffer from the fast pace of life, a lack of leisure time and physical exercises, and high pressure from work and competition, while in the rural area where there is not much to do for some people, life is boring and time needs to be filled with leisure, such as mah-jongg, which brings disease or inferior well-being, physically, socially, and psychologically. In different lifestyles and contexts people suffer from similar problems, which phenomenon left us in contemplation—what is the ultimate cause of these multi-faceted social diseases and low level of well-being?

I would argue that a lack of meaning for life, a sense of being ungrounded in the world, and an existential homelessness (Mugerauer 1994) are triggers of various kinds of problems in human society, as they are the ultimate quest for human beings (Frankl 1984), and also the causes of problems in my studied area. Earlier scholars consider the more relativistic view of the world and values in cities compared to small communities, reinforced by rapid change, less reality and universal principles, and an ethical uncertainty results in the lack of order, meaning and purpose (Clapp 1978; Thompson 2009). The confusion and uprootedness in urban contexts are apparent causes of mental and spiritual problems. All these factors result in an existential homelessness, the main “disease” to be healed, which is still true in the Chinese context.

Other than social studies, physiological experiments suggest that the difference between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being influence people deeply, even on a genetic level. Hedonic well-being

is “the sum of an individual’s positive affective experiences,” while “a deeper eudaimonic form results from striving toward meaning and a noble purpose beyond simple self-gratification.” (Fredrickson et.al 2013) People who engage more with sensuous or mundane happiness were reported to have less active antibodies, while those who find meaning in their lives tend to enjoy better genetic composition and longevity (Fredrickson et.al 2013). Although no causal relationship can be concluded from statistical studies, certain associations are observed between the meaning of life and well-being.

As discussed above, current urban life in China is full of competition driven by a sense of insecurity and the anxiety of survival, without the awareness of the ultimate goal or meaning of individuals’ lives, while rural life leaves people idle without knowing how they should spend their time and energy. Members of the Chen Family and some participants, however, are less bothered by this issue.

Sister Chen has her own special ideas about life and everyday events. Compared to ordinary people, especially rural women who are usually less educated and less independent, financially and intellectually, she is a counterexample in many ways. She clearly knows her situation in the world, in other words, she has a solid view of the world and frequently reflects on her own life with this view. Meanwhile, she is also highly aware of her status in every aspect, physical, mental, and spiritual. For instance, there was one time she had a minor car accident, but what came to her mind at first was not insurance or monetary loss but her mental status at that time. “I reflected on myself and found the real reason of my accident—on that day there were people coming to learn our experiences and I gave a talk. I was too vain and lost the balance of my mind. That is the real reason of the accident: my mind. If I have a peaceful mind I’ll be good with anything.” (Interview May 16, 2012) Her idea about insurance is very different from most people’s, while obviously it is well thought out. “Insurance doesn’t assure anything—it pays you if unexpected negative things happen but does not stop it from happening—what really matters is my deeds—if I’ve been doing good to people I don’t need to worry about bad things happening to me (she deeply believes in causality). It’s much better to spend the money on helping people like donations or something similar than on insurance.” (Interview May 16, 2012)

She has been divorced and is a single mother since her son was one year old; she supports him financially with her herb garden and psychologically with her beliefs. The bright boy is in high school now, also highly aware of his deeds like his mother, being a rigorous vegetarian and thoughtful on school issues. Ms. Chen is comfortable and actually proud of her current work and doesn't envy the so-called high-end jobs, such as the financial business, which in her opinion doesn't produce anything and only earns money from others. She considers those jobs as unreal or not grounded. In her opinion, though, ecological agriculture is a conscientious practice and makes her feel peaceful and steady.

Another positive change on psychological well-being has something to do with a sense of pride. Farmers and the rural context have been looked down upon ever since the establishment of the current China or even in history, which is also reflected in the Chen Family. I remember clearly the day Ms. Chen went to the busy business center of Chengdu, Kuanzhaixiangzi, which is retrofitted as a historic block to attract tourists, selling expensive commodities, food, and catering service. It is a highly gentrified place without local residents, and always crowded with visitors from other cities and countries for the exotic local culture. When she got back there was a look of loss and alienation on her face: "People there all look so fashionable, with good outfits and light skin color—it's only me who's so dark—I never found that before. I found myself so rustic..." This typically reflects the psychological gap or disparity between rural and urban residents, who enjoy extremely different social resources and status. She had been quite down that day, but these are rare moments for her, and most of the time she is quite confident, compared to other rural farmers. She considers ecological agriculture a good way of urban-rural communication and boosting confidence of farmers. She gradually gained this confidence in the process of practicing organic farming and getting into contact with visitors from the outside world. She drives a car around, selling herbs to well-to-do individuals and families in the city. Over the years more and more people came to visit and get experience from them; she even went to universities to give talks, all of which greatly improved her confidence and self-esteem. "Urban people visiting the countryside and learning from farmers would greatly improve farmers' self-respect and confidence, and they would have pride of themselves," she said in a firm tone.

Similar to a lot of rural migrant workers, the oldest brother Chen used to work in Fujian Province⁶² and Chengdu as a construction administrator. He became tired of the urban lifestyle, full of meaningless feasting and revelry, and returned home. “When I was in Chengdu the usual after-work leisure is to spend time in a bar and sing in a Karaoke place, especially during holidays or festivals, plus exchanging gifts (usually monetary)... Those are a waste of time and mind space and don’t do me any good.” (Interview April 30, 2012) Now, he is in charge of delivering vegetables, one of the key components of the whole vegetable selling chain. Compared to Ms. Chen, he struggles with the future and the development of the family’s career, but he is generally confident with what they are doing. When asked the question of what has changed after transferring to organic farming, he provided the answer without a second thought: “My health status became much better. I get fewer colds and feel stronger with physical work. Besides, I feel more confident with what I’m doing as more and more people support us.”

Mrs. Chen (Ms. Huang), the hostess of the family, is a devoted Buddhist and applies Buddhist principles to her farming practice and everyday life. She thought about leaving home and becoming a nun in her early twenties, and has been a rigorous vegetarian for many years. With a solid belief in a universe run by a just law, she has unusual patience and tolerance in various aspects of her life, including farming, nutrition and health, vegetable selling, social behaviors, and so on. A lot of vegetable subscribers came to trust their produce as a result from talking to her. “The energy staying in vegetables is of a certain amount and doesn’t increase even if the plants grow bigger because of chemicals. It is the same with everything. No matter what we do, we have to be patient and attentive, not only pursuing quick achievement on the surface.” (interview April 29, 2012) This view of the world obviously helps her life in multiple ways. She has a more peaceful mind compared to peers and a better physical health situation, still active in her late sixties, often working until late night. She is in a good shape and enjoys a clear mind, farming and talking about classic literature and Buddhist sutras to people who are interested.

As noted earlier, the youngest son of the family, Mr. Chen, used to work outside in Shanghai but returned to the village later. In the big city, he was actually very financially successful; he

⁶² Fujian Province is in southeast China, among the wealthy provinces in the country.

managed a night club and got in touch with wealthy entrepreneurs, but he didn't feel happy. He returned and liked to do manual work and felt more relaxed and enriched both physically and psychologically.

He is a socially sophisticated young man, fluent in multiple dialects including Min'nán⁶³ and some others, from his working experience in Shanghai. He is also good at cooking and socializing, with a great potential of being a successful business person. He found solace, however, in simple farming work—he still stays in the nearby city Chengdu most of the time to cope with his desire of living a privileged and convenient urban life and making a better material wealth, but he comes back to the village once every while, helping out with catering and farming work. He describes humble farming work with a poetic tone of recollection: “when I was in the city it constantly feels tiring—tiring from the socializing activities and entertainment—but I remember I never felt tired with the farming work. I can carry stuff for over two hundred *jin*⁶⁴ and I was good at taking out canola seeds.⁶⁵ I always felt full of energy and a high spirit when I was doing farming work.” (Interview May 26, 2012)

The Chen Family not only enjoys a peaceful and enriched life but also shares their ideas with visitors and fellow farmers from the village. Several helpers, who are middle-aged women helping Ms. Huang in the field every day, are all from the same village and related to one another in various ways. They had stopped doing farming work before, either relying on the income of younger family members working in the city or despising farming because of the menial income. But what I observed is industrious and meticulous work from most of them; arriving at the field right on time every day and consistently working even in the scorching sun of early summer until sunset. They would gather and have lunch together every day, chatting from time to time. There is frequently a discussion on being an honest and hard-working farmer, relinquishing from meaningless entertainment like mah-jongg. “I feel I'm a useful person again,” said Ms. Yang,

⁶³ A dialect that is very different from Mandarin and difficult to learn.

⁶⁴ 100 kilos.

⁶⁵ For taking out canola seeds, a long and heavy tool is used to hit sun-dried canola plants, constantly and skillfully. I tried to learn it but didn't succeed.

with a skinny figure but strong and energetic with the farming work. “This is actually a kind of exercise for me—I sleep very well every night now, and my body gets motivated.”

Working on the farm doesn’t necessarily mean a better idea about the meaning of life, especially when they have not been working there for a long time. Ms. Wang is a helper in Ms. Chen’s herb garden and shared various aspects of her thoughts with me. She’s been here for short period of time and has not been deeply influenced by the family yet. She is divorced and remarried with two kids and has to work long hours to support her family. She views the work as a burden and her main recreation is to “play on the street”, which means going to town and enjoying herself, mostly in the way of looking at commodities from the outside, shopping and dining out. Chen family’s life is “unhappy” from her perspective as “they are vegetarians and nobody else gets used to their lifestyle or enjoys a diet of vegetarians.” Her situation is a reflection of typical rural women’s thinking which largely differs from the Chen’s ideology. In this sense, the extent that the Chens diverge from average rural Chinese is noticeable and worth studying. The well-being they enjoy has little to do with material wealth but a connection with the land, people, and the self. Ms. Wang’s case also implies that the mindset with which people engage with land and farming largely influences their well-being.

To Let Nature Take Its Course

Another often mentioned element in the cluster of existential well-being is to let nature take its course, or to be patient, or to accept all happenings in life, in other words.

“You can’t be impatient with farming. Vegetables that grow fast are stimulated with fertilizers. The energy or nutrition in these vegetables are concentrated, although they look small.” (Interview with Yang’s wife, May 5, 2012)

Some more sensitive and thoughtful participants in the program who described how they got their philosophy of “letting nature take its course” from the farming experience and how that helps their daily life.

“The whole process is slow; the society is too eager for quick success and instant

benefits, but here we have to respect the pace of nature, which IS slow and cannot be changed. Here I learned to be patient and feel awe for nature.” (Interview with April, May 19, 2012)

When answering my question of “what if vegetables don’t grow well and you need to eat”, Mr. Qian made a delicate statement:

“I just let nature take its course. It took me a while to figure this out. Yes, I don’t insist too much or expect too much, as long as you did your best... If vegetables don’t grow well there must be a lot of reasons but you have to let it go. If you desire too much you would feel painful. You can’t take control of the world and can only do whatever you are capable of. Work is the same; as long as you didn’t loaf on the job it is fine. There are some factors that you can’t control.”

“Gardening also helps me with everyday life, gradually, unconsciously and subtly. It takes time. In many situations things don’t happen just because you make a clear statement or resolution, such as ‘I must be such and such’. You don’t need to think that much. You don’t need too many goals. I only set short-term goals like what to finish today, and I don’t know about the rest. Who knows what will happen after this? In this society there is so little that you can control.”

Scientific research supports these urban farmers’ experience with statistical data. The ability to accept what cannot be changed is found to be as significant as a sense of control over health, especially for older ages (Broadbent 2013).

“I’m trying to find a lifestyle that’s safe and healthy, and simple. Actually, a lot of things that we meet are not planned; they just come themselves. Don’t pursue something on purpose; otherwise you would be disappointed, for sure. Everyone would experience this process; either learning as a kid or working as an adult; we think too much as ‘I must be something or achieve something’, and when you can’t you feel painful. Then you doubt yourself and the society, which doesn’t help at all.” (Interview with Mr. Qian, May 12, 2012)

As discussed above in this chapter, from these individuals' experience, themes of a better situation of well-being emerge. From clean air to physical exercises, from a sense of equality to being existentially grounded, from establishing social connections to sharing fruits, and from serving the land to being in peace with nature, the natural farming practice in Ningyuan is interpreted as a healthy place to engage with and improve individuals' well-being on various levels and from different aspects.

Chapter 5. Community Well-being and the Experience in the Landscape

The concepts of healthy and livable places, communities and cities have been promoted by scholars and activists, and research on these themes has been burgeoning recently (Dannenberg, Frumkin, and Jackson 2011; Guidry and United States Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2001; Jackson and Sinclair 2012; Wagner and Caves 2012; Wolff 2010). This humanistic viewpoint pays attention to the aspect of quality of life of places on both individual and community levels. These studies are largely in the U.S. context, and this research provides an example in the Chinese context to fill the empirical gap.

Other than physical, psychological and other levels of well-being for individuals, a salient but not prevalently seen phenomenon that is observed in Ningyuan Village is the emergence of a value- and interest-based community, which interrelates different backgrounds of individuals and organizations supporting one another in a healthy way. This chapter will trace the community's formation process, provide a depiction of its internal dynamics, and analyze related themes that emerged from this research.

5.1 The participants and the forming of the community

Different participants from rural and urban areas, from domestic and international backgrounds, including individuals and groups, compose this complex and vibrant community that is based on shared ideas and values. These participants include the core family, urban farmers, environmental NGOs and their leaders, members, and volunteers, college and other students, helpers in the field, religious organizations, charity groups, academic researchers, and individual volunteers and visitors from different backgrounds (Figure 16). This part of the chapter will provide a description of the community based on the structure of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and trace its development.

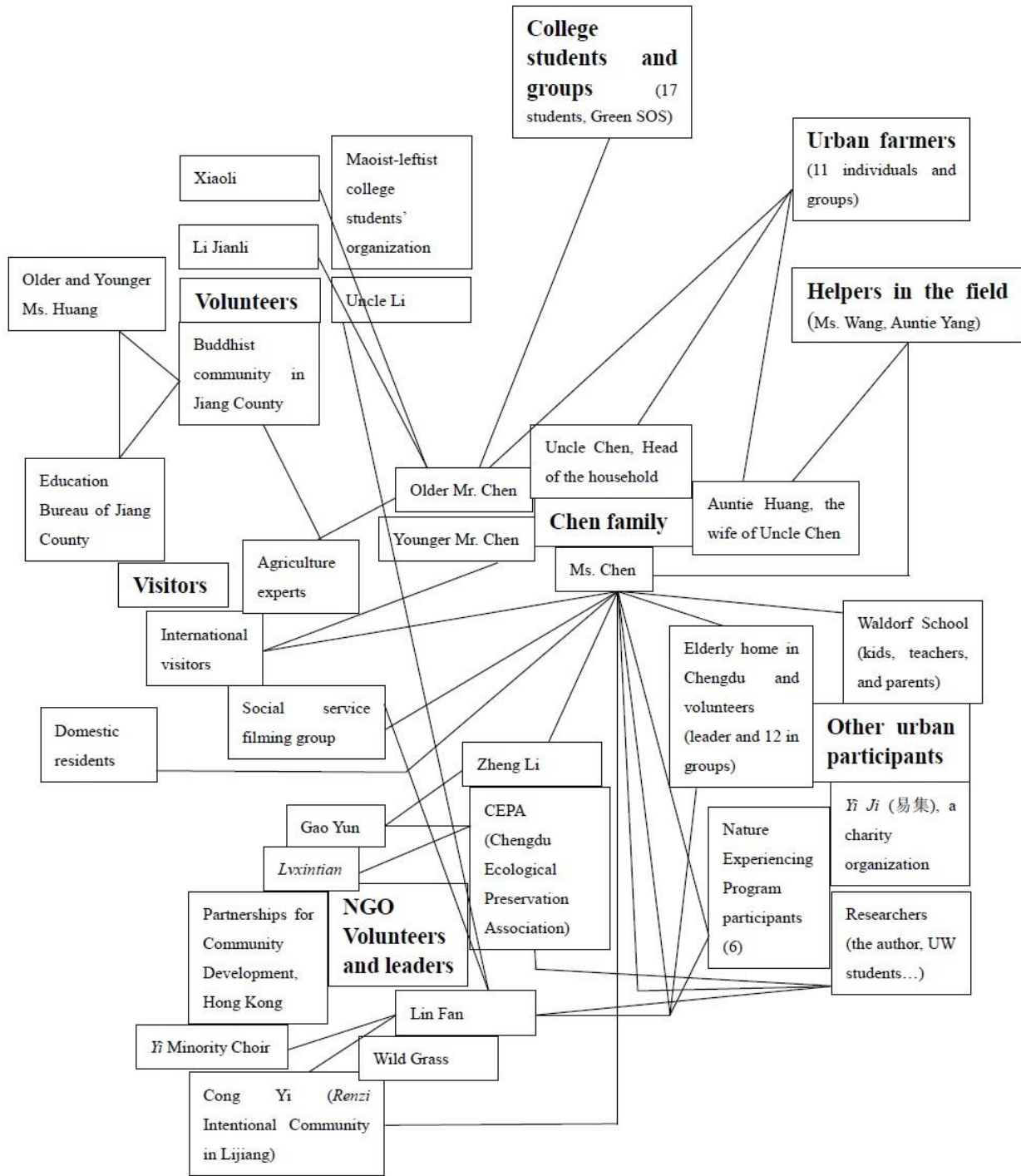


Figure 16. ANT chart of the community in the Ningyuan case.

5.1.1 A-actors

According to Callon (1986), ANT conceptualizes A-actors as those in the network mobilizing interests, organizing, and providing knowledge-based arguments. In this case A-actors are primarily NGOs and active individuals who promote this community with articulated discourses and artifacts.

As mentioned in previous chapters, the Chengdu Ecological Preservation Association⁶⁶ (CEPA) is a local environmental NGO supported by the municipal environment bureau. CEPA was the first A-actor getting involved; as a model project of river environmental improvement in Chengdu in 2005, they started monitoring and treating water quality in Fucheng River which runs through Ningyuan Village. An efficient way to reduce water pollution is to develop ecologically-sound riparian agriculture so that fewer chemicals are discharged into rivers. Working with villagers, CEPA brought environmental knowledge as well as the idea of organic farming, and the Chen family devotedly accepted these new thoughts. They read Fukuoka's books on natural farming (1978), and began to transform the soil by practicing organic farming. CEPA's involvement in this community has been multifaceted: since 2005, CEPA has brought information, technology, resources, and visitors to the village. A set of infrastructure that supports ecological lifestyle was installed including water treatment, ecological toilets, maneuver collecting facilities, among other measures. CEPA's work was successfully carried out, partly because of their close relationship with the municipal government of Chengdu. As the first core participant from the outside, they built the foundation of the community.

Black Soil is a Chengdu-based grass root environmental NGO, introduced to the village by other NGOs. It got involved later than CEPA, but is highly active in various aspects. Compared to CEPA, it is a grassroots organization with no governmental connections and a smaller staff, but the shared ideas and visions brought Black Soil close to this village serving as an A-actor in this community. The leader of Black Soil, Lin Fan, personally benefited greatly from the urban

⁶⁶ Pseudonyms are used for organizations as well.

farmer idea and started building his own balcony garden at home in Chengdu. With this as the starting point he began to promote urban farming in multiple places in the city.

Black Soil organizes various activities in the village and orders products from them. Now it has become one of the most involved NGO participants in this community. Through its environmental education and experience activities, a broad range of people have gotten connected to the community and greatly expanded it.

The growth and expansion of the community is like a rolling snowball. After CEPA connected the village with the initial participants, these participants introduced more like-minded actors to work together. The Partnership for Community Development is an NGO focusing on community development with its headquarters in Hong Kong. It provides some financial support and participates in this community through its dedicated staff and volunteers. They also bring researchers, visitors, and other participants to this community. Rural co-ops, in many cases, benefit from NGO's support in various aspects (Hale 2013).

Chengdu's Waldorf School is one of many independent but affiliated schools educating children according to the core ideas of the Waldorf Movement, that utilizes concepts of Anthroposophy promulgated by the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, that takes a humanistic approach to pedagogy and emphasizes the broader evolution of human consciousness, intuitive insights, and spiritual development (Steiner 1999; 2000). It goes strongly against the materialistic ideology that has dominated Chinese society since the establishment of the socialist regime, if not earlier. Therefore, their idea of education and early development of humans stands as a striking contrast from mainstream schools and prevalent thinking and practice in the society. It is not surprising that they are involved in the Ningyuan project in various aspects, as Steiner was one of the pioneers of modern organic farming, having proposed the concept of biodynamic agriculture (Steiner 2003; 2004). The school organizes curriculum in the village and gets products from it on a regular basis. Parents of these students are actively involved in this community, participating in all kinds of activities and subscribing for deliveries of vegetables, herbs and other products.

I went to sell herbs with Ms. Chen (Sister Chen) to parents of Waldorf school kids and teachers once. It was a warm and stuffy afternoon in June, the air drowsy and still. We parked outside the

entrance before school was out, and after a while parents started coming and formed a circle around us. Most mothers are dressed in loose cotton clothes, a style called “forest females” in contemporary China, borrowed from Japan and followed by literate young women. As mentioned in previous chapters, most females who follow this style are middle-class urban dwellers. Some of them were so happily surprised to see Sister Chen, and immediately started talking to her.

“Sister Chen! What brought you here today?”

“Selling some herbs. How have you been?”

“I’m all right. It’s been a while since I went to Ningyuan last time. I hope Uncle Chen and Auntie Huang are both doing fine... what are these herbs and how much?”

As they started talking about the functions and benefits of different herbs, my initial awkwardness about selling, being in a disadvantaged position in a power relationship, faded.. They didn’t appear as the two parties in a commercial exchange but like equal human beings and friends, each benefiting from one another. I felt even the air started blowing and a fresh breeze came from the conversation.

It can be observed that parents and the Chen family have formed a friendly and mutually trusting community. Some families organized a community that physically stays together in a rural area (Sansheng Township) near Chengdu, practicing sustainable agricultural life. This community frequently goes to Ningyuan to learn farming techniques, too. As mentioned above, the teaching idea of Waldorf is very different from ordinary Chinese elementary or middle schools, and there is a curriculum of farming in this family for all third-year students, so their yearly visits to Ningyuan have become a routine activity. They have a series of disciplines that differentiate them sharply from ordinary elementary schools.

I had the chance to observe their learning in the village when I stayed with the family. The day they arrived was a bright sunny morning in May. Several teachers brought about thirty students, all of whom were talking in a curious and excited manner. Before lunch one of the teachers introduced all members from the family, and told them to be thankful of their effort put into their

food. After saying “thank you” to each of the family members, they respectfully finished the meal and divided themselves into several groups with the teachers’ instruction, helping the host family with cleaning the table, doing dishes, wiping the floor, and other chores.

I spent several days in the city with the movie group, discussing and shooting sections of the scenes. The afternoon when I got back to the village, all the school kids were gathering outside the room where I stayed, watching Sister Chen extracting essential oils from herbs. Their eyes shone with curiosity and the courtyard was filled by their questions and laughter. Sister Chen was in a teacher-like mood, patiently answering their questions and smiling. I believe that was one of the moments when she felt confident and proud of her knowledge, practice, and life.

I thought this was very intriguing and found Fang Wei, a horticulture teacher in Waldorf, and talked to him. “The aim of taking them here is to teach them some realistic and physical stuff. They have too much here (pointing to his head). They need to see various real things, including how various elements of their life are formed and where they are produced. Their daily routine includes helping in the kitchen, organizing the hall for their meal, taking care of cleaning, washing bowls, and so on.”

The 2013 potato harvest has surpassed average yields, and vegetable subscribers could not exhaust the surplus. So, Mr. Chen contacts Waldorf and tries to organize a group purchase, as parents of school children might be interested. The role of farmers in this organic farming practice is still hard as they have to bear all the risks of unexpected weather, market fluctuations, and so on, which is different from a typical CSA, but the support of the established community is important.

An experiential environmental education program serves as a typical example. Black Soil designs and organizes the workshop, and invites over a hundred residents from Chengdu to participate in the full-day program including various sections. Instead of driving into the village, participants enter it quietly, walking along the tree-and-bamboo-lined path along the river. Basic knowledge of organic farming, the soil it requires, and the ecosystem are introduced as the first section of the program. Ms. Chen leads participants to the herb garden to get a sense of plants, especially herbs, (Figure 17), including the history of some species and the functions of herbs for

everyday human lives. Lin Fan leads the next section on practicing urban balcony gardening with bamboo soil containers in the aim of promoting urban agriculture. An active section of natural dyeing engages participants and prepares them for a night's sleep. Multiple members of the community were involved: Ms. Chen, myself, the scriptwriter of the social service movie, actors, actresses and some staff members who works for the movie, Mr. Li, a retired chemist in a drug company and active urban farmer, and Cong Yi, who runs Renzi intentional community in Lijiang, Yunnan Province. All of them either lead a section of the program or help in various ways. The Chens provided a natural vegetarian dinner as a way to promote healthy vegetarian lifestyle, after which the Yi ethnic minority choir performs in the quiet night of the village, only with the company of chirps of insects, cool summer night breeze, and the moonlight.



Figure 17. Visitors learning about herbs and plants in the environmental experiencing program.

Many participants have sent feedback to Black Soil considering it an eye-opening experience and they feel touched and stretched in terms of the knowledge of nature and social connections.

Some eagerly ask for a second visit or seek a way to get more frequently involved. It is expected

that some of them will become long-term active members of the community in the near future. Through these activities the community keeps expanding and attracting new members.

Later, some residential neighborhoods in Chengdu are invited to this program and in this way get involved in this community; some of the residents have become long-time friends, loyal customers and advocates for this community and their practice. The community expands with A-actors' active promotion and involvement at the first place, and cannot succeed without the effort of the core family.

5.1.2 The core family

The Chen Family (Figure 18) is the core of this community. They provide physical space and a communication platform for other participants. Different family members take necessary roles in connecting with others: providing products, delivering vegetables, arranging activities, providing caterings, communicating with people, and so on.

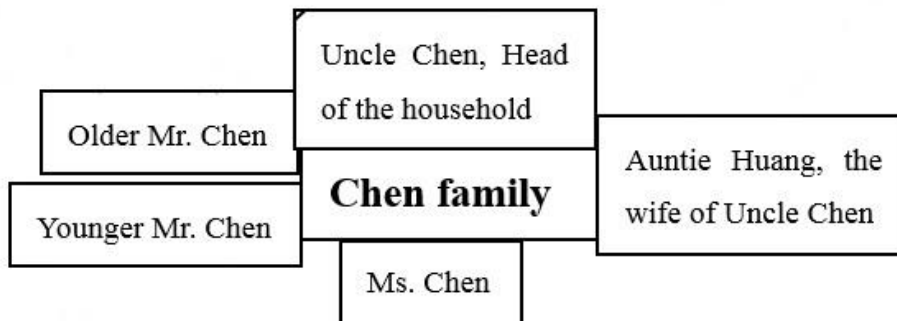


Figure 18. ANT chart of the core family.

They play the crucial role in the forming of this community, especially at the early stages of the development. Mr. Chen and Ms. Huang usually work in the field not far from the house, and the central hall and the courtyard of the house are the main space for visitors to stay and spend time in. Whenever visitors come—most of whom are people interested in agriculture, rural development and food safety—family members would talk to them and introduce their own experience. Weekdays are usually lighter while on weekends regular visitors would occupy the

whole space. Most urban farmers come on weekends, and environmental programs are mostly held on weekends. During these moments, the central hall and the courtyard become the dining room for these community participants: eating and talking to one another, exchanging experience of farming and life stories. Vegetarian catering of the Chen family has become well known gradually and the family is Buddhist; therefore, the county's Buddhist community has gathered to practice rituals or celebrate festivals and have meals here too. Some of them are involved in this community in various ways. One of the main Buddhist community organizers initiated a summer camp, at first only for several children of hers and friends, but it soon became known by other people too, so the camp gathered about 15 children from elementary school to high school ages to spend the summer in the village, instead of sitting in front of the computer or TV screen. Some of the parents joined the community because of the camp, too. Visitors also like to spend time in the field, and getting a sense of organic farming, the cycle of the ecosystem and the soil..

The herb garden of Ms. Chen has been another popular venue for most visitors. Recognizing plant species, getting to know functions of herbs for human health, and buying herbal products are led by Ms. Chen and highly appreciated by visitors. Being in the field, touching the soil, smelling herbs are reported as positive experiences that encourage visitors to get involved in either the urban farmers program or actively participating in the community's practice. People make friends during the process and different generations and families are brought together.

Ms. Chen builds connections with community members through her herbs and herbal products, for instance the Waldorf School in Chengdu, as mentioned above, a charity group called Yiji, where she sells her herbal products and donates her income for charity purposes, mostly to assist rural development and low-income community aid.. She frequently sells herbs at the Waldorf School and became friends with school kids' parents, some of whom turned into devoted participants in this community, coming to farm every weekend, participating in all sorts of education programs, and practicing urban farming at home. Obviously, they have formed a community of shared goals and constructively engage in activities collectively.

Delivering vegetables to Chengdu and the county seat is a way to expand the community and get connected to the outside world. Brother Chen (Older Mr. Chen) drives to the city twice a week to

provide fresh vegetables to subscribers. He leaves bags of vegetables at the entrance of residential complexes and collects bags from previous times. More people get to know this community through subscribers program and potentially join them. And because Brother Chen has a better and more frequent physical contact with the city, a large portion of visitors get to know Ningyuan Village and their organic farming practice through him. He would also pick up city visitors or volunteers who don't drive and bring them to the village.

The family also has received overnight visitors, most of whom are college students, volunteers, or environmental club leaders from nearby universities. Some of them stay there to experience rural life, some hold conferences or workshops in a more natural setting there. Most of these frequent visitors become well acquainted with this family and establish mutual trust and interest in each other.

5.1.3 Other human actors

Relatively peripheral actors might only participate in the community on the edge or for limited times with spatial or time limits; they are also, however, important nodes of the network: newcomers get connected to the community through them, and they strengthen existing relationships with current members and promote shared values, discourses and ideas too.

Lvxintian (meaning a green field for the heart) is a local NGO advocating for green lifestyle and helps with selling vegetables and introducing people to the community. Like other organizations, they also bring visitors and potential new members to this community.

A-actors bring a lot of participants or relatively peripheral members to the community.

Charity groups like Yiji (meaning a market for exchange) indirectly participate in this community. The Chen Family regularly sells their goods on the market and donates to support remote rural areas, and through these charity groups more people get to know and connected to this community.

College students from Chengdu organize themselves to farm in the village every week, most of whom also participate in similar programs on campus, for instance, urban agriculture and

environmental education. Besides, leaders of students' environmental clubs meet regularly in the village to reflect on their experiences. On some occasions, students' environmental organizations from all over the province would hold their conferences here. These are younger participants in the community. Regular meetings among local students' environmental association leaders are held here too, sharing their farming and working experience. These programs also involve other participants, for instance NGO volunteers who give free talks or facilitate meetings.

Urban farmers are mostly individuals or families from nearby cities, for instance Chengdu, Jiang County seat, and other regional centers. They play an important role in the community, introducing this village to friends and make friends in the field and stay connected with them even after they get back to their dispersed cities. Because these people are mostly from the upper class in the social hierarchy, they have connections to all sorts of power and may be helpful in special situations.

The family's village neighbors work as helpers in the fields.. They form a friendly relationship with the family although they are hired and paid as employees. The family spreads related knowledge and value to them. They are the rural participants in the community.

Volunteers are from domestic or international areas, including individuals and groups, for instance, people who value organic agriculture and an environmentally-friendly lifestyles, would stay in the village and experience their life. Some international groups choose to do community service in this village, helping with construction, farming, and so on.

Visitors include domestic and international individuals too, most of whom are introduced to this place by other members of the community. There are agricultural experts visiting, too, hoping to obtain successful experiences of organic farming and rural development. This village is also connected to other farms practicing organic farming, and other agricultural experts all over the country.

As this community formed around the Chens gets more and more renowned, social service filming groups would shoot films here with the scene of their field. And one group has shot a documentary on organic farming completely with this village as the setting.

Even the government is slightly involved in this community that has formed itself in a bottom-up way. The Education Bureau of Jiang County has visited the village's traditional cultural education program, promoting simple life and going back to agricultural ideology. Officials admire this lifestyle as individuals as they also desire clean air, healthy food and peaceful pace of life.

Among individual volunteers, students from Maoist-leftist organizations are a main part of it. They usually stay in the village for a substantial period of time, closely observing their farming and life as empirical data and trying to figure out a way out of the current "capitalist" society.

Researchers from domestic and international settings do various studies in this village. These participants expand the community and introduce new people to know this place.

Elderly homes, elementary schools and residential neighborhoods in Chengdu participate in this community as organic products consumers and environmental education recipients. They are mostly connected to his community through the NGO Black Soil and their urban agriculture program. Golden Sunshine Elderly Home is one of his sites; the institution has reclaimed a piece of land with the size of 20 square meters (about 215 square feet) to grow vegetables for residents and collect rainwater on site, and in this way elderly residents get involved in this program and observe the site on a regular basis with great interest. Most residents are over eighty and they don't directly get involved in growing but provided opinions of species they would like to see in this small garden. They also observe the process and talk to volunteers, who are mostly from a branch of the American corporation Intel, colleges in Chengdu, and elementary schools. This type of communication is deeper than normal, delivering "warm activities" in elderly homes as volunteers come on a regular basis and love to do it. It is also a nice way of environmental education for volunteers, most of whom are young, white-collar workers and lacking any knowledge of the ecosystem. Every weekend, there are about 20 of them coming, and during harvest time everybody is very delighted. Volunteers like to come as it is a way of relaxing from stressful work, and "comparing to staying at home and playing computer games, this is absolutely better". Black Soil holds regular meetings in the elderly home to share and reflect on volunteers' experiences of working on this field, and brings products from the village. Touching

the soil and seeing the products, they understand more of the natural system and become a peripheral part of the community. It is also a way to spread environmental knowledge as Lin Fan and Black Soil are passionate about educating ordinary citizens, creating a grassroots effort to improve the ecosystem. They give lectures to volunteers who are mostly from cities and hardly have any knowledge of farming, the food system and ecological recovery.

Intentional communities like Renzi (meaning children of human beings) from Yunnan Province participate in this community as supporters for Black Soil's environmental education program. They bring ideas of not only permaculture but also social care and sustainability.

Similarly, the Yi Ethnic Minority Choir has gotten involved in this village supporting an experiential environmental education program with their traditional music.

As the core family is devout in their religious beliefs, Buddhist communities all over the county are involved in the community in various ways. Certain Buddhist rituals are practiced in the village and they bring new members to the community. On important Buddhist holidays they release captive animals in the village, which is a Buddhist ritual to accumulate merits, and have organic vegetarian lunches with the family when they practice rituals here. Catering with organic food has become an attraction for various visitors and friends of this community.

Two of the organizers of these Buddhists, the two Huang sisters, arrange summer camp for kids in the village, in which they learn to farm and get knowledge of nature and the ecosystem. And in this way, kids' parents get to know this village and their ideas and practice.

A Buddhist community has certainly formed with the Chen family at its center. Wenshu Yuan (literally the monastery of Manjusri Bodhisattva, one of the biggest Buddhist monasteries in Chengdu) purchases herbs as landscaping plants for their gardens from Ms. Chen's herb garden. They also learn organic growing from Ms. Chen.

Programs of college students are another important avenue to get connected to new people. During my village stay, Eco Actions (an organization of environmental association leaders from colleges in the nearby city Chengdu) organizes a workshop aiming to share experience and

benefits from getting involved in their campus work, such as on-campus farming, learning and publicizing knowledge about garbage and the ecosystem and so on. The first morning one of the leaders gives a brief introduction of the soils and plants they are farming, including the botanical plant names and technical tips of farming. Several of them come to the village every weekend to take care of their plants, and they enjoy it very much. Then they perform a self-directed and acted drama in the grove not far from the Chen family's house, that acknowledges their experience and growth in the past year and puts them in the mood for serious contemplation. They also stage connection "rituals" with their favorite trees. In the afternoon they have a general discussion at the environmental education center of CEPA (Chengdu Ecological Preservation Association). The second day, they have a "mind developing" program with the Sun family, a member of the organic growing and delivering team, with various little games telling potentials and limitations of human mind and rationality, and how that is related to their environmental association work.

This community also has close connection with other farmers practicing organic or natural farming in the country, for instance An Jinlei. They visit each other's farms and share experiences. It also helps build up knowledge and confidence among members of this community.

There are also individuals who are interested in related issues visiting this family. A couple from Beijing has been engaged in organic or natural farming and visits a lot of such farms around the country. Another couple is from Chengdu, who also visit organic farms around the city and are interested in the idea of intentional communities or eco-villages introduced in the documentary *New We*. These two couples are both in their forties, curious and enthusiastic. "It seems that many young people are interested in these kind of issues, but it is also important that people of our age get involved as we are the core force of the society and have the most resources and connections. If the two groups of people work together, it'll be much more effective in promoting these practices."

The expanding community helps the village in significant ways. In 2008 there was a developer who tried to convince them to move away and sell their land but they were able to stay because

many customers and friends in the community are resourceful and powerful; they supported the family in various ways to keep their land safe.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, a group of volunteers from Chengdu and Taiwan has shot a social-service movie in the village. The spirit of the movie is about a lifestyle that is healthy, sustainable and cares about the environment and human spirit, and pursues the meaning of life for individuals living in modern urban society. The core idea of the movie attracts volunteer actors, the director and crew, and forms a community including people farmers in Ningyuan Village. One of the scenes that is shot in the village is the main female character coming to find herself and find organic farming and the magic of nature. The productive energy and the natural cycle of lives amazes her. As the Chen family has become famous in the circle of people who care about nature and organic agriculture, this village as the place for filming is quickly proposed and selected. Interestingly, the script writer visits the village before filming and meets me; we had a smooth and deep conversation about nature, the crisis of the current world, meaning of life and the connection with organic farming, and the two feel connected in some way that is difficult to describe. Then I was invited to play a role in the movie; the girl in the movie who works in the herb garden and meets a painter who has lost belief in his everyday life and marriage, and gets reconnected to nature, people, and himself in the herb garden. Ningyuan Village and the Chen family play a role of connecting people with similar interests and goals, forming a community transcending geographical space.

From then on, the filming crew goes to the village frequently, either to shoot a scene or to get fresh vegetables. Subsequently, they participate in the natural experience program organized by Black Soil, documenting the whole process and preparing necessary artifacts for it.

Ms. Zhao Jie, an agriculture expert, visits the village during the time I was there. She gets to know this place by the introduction of the Beijing couple, and feels almost hopeless about the general future of Chinese agriculture before she visits. Before her Ningyuan visit, she saw many organic farms across the country that are suffering a lack of financial support, threatening food security and the future of undeveloped rural areas. Her hometown used to be an agricultural area too, but has suffered from gambling, the growing porn industry, and an aimless pursuit of profit.

Agricultural activities have been almost abandoned in that area, and she desperately looks for ways out of it. Having stayed in the family's field for only an afternoon, her mood changes so much that she starts talking about a future plan for her hometown with Mr. Chen, who encourages her. That, as long as she makes effort, there is the hope of success. They exchange contact information and agree to communicate in the future for mutual help and information. Interestingly, Zhao Jie is also a devoted Buddhist and brings an open attitude, being focused and industrious.

Cong Yi and his wife are staff of *Renzi* in Lijiang, similar to an intentional community, its mission to support individuals who are experiencing difficulties in their life, by sharing work, meals, and space together. Their main goal is to accompany people, to work and live together and create a community that is humanely supportive. Most of their visitors are people in crisis, and children with various difficulties. They grow food and build houses together, as a way of psychological healing. Visiting their place is free, and visitors are from all over the world. They come to the village to help with Black Soil's nature experiencing program, as hosts of one of the sections. They first got to know the Chens during the serious earthquake of 2008 and have remained friends since because of shared ideas and interests.

There are also individual visiting college students who study agriculture and care about the future of rural development. Getting a sense of a practical organic farming system, they consider introducing it to their fellow students and getting involved in some way.

Students from an American high school did community service in the village, helping Ms. Chen with her little cabin. The teacher, Nicky, told me they have a little garden on campus; students design the form of the garden and plan for the growing activity. "Putting their hands in the dirt is peaceful and happy." Students helped with building a cabin, preparing food, and learning a natural way of living. Environmental NGOs connected them to the village and made them visible internationally. An Indian student learning the Chinese language in Chengdu is introduced here by CEPA, and she's interested in promoting organic farming and rural development in India and Nepal, as she worked in the latter for a long time. Other students and researchers from different countries are connected and visit the village through the introductions of various environmental

NGOs, for instance I and other University of Washington researchers have been contacted through Black Soil.

5.1.4 Artifacts

As pointed out by ANT, not only human actors but also artifacts are important factors in the forming of a network or community, and it proves substantiated in the Ningyuan case. Vegetables delivered to the city are the main products that meet the outside world. A lot of urban residents who become members of the community get interested in the village and their practices through their vegetables delivered in green bags.

Herbs and herbal products from Ms. Chen's garden have become an icon of this community. The physical landscape is unique with exotic plants and fragrance that can be smelled far away (Figure 19). Her essential oil extracting equipment always attracts interest and curiosity, with visitors gathering around it.



Figure 19. Plants in the herb garden.

Bigger elements of the physical landscape are important artifacts in this network too. The river meandering through the village brings calmness and cools down the air to the local environment. It always becomes the first landscape element that attracts people's attention. In the above-mentioned experiential environmental education program it is taken as an important focus of potential human experience.

The water treatment system (Figure 20) is a several-tier infrastructure that piles up pebbles to detain rainwater or waste water and filter water with plants growing in the system. As the system is right outside the entrance of the Chen's house it becomes a spatial node that gathers visitors.



Figure 20. The water treatment system outside Chen's yard.
(Photo by Angie McCarrel.)

There are also seasonal and ephemeral landscape elements that become important artifacts in the network. In early June, some dry land is turned into rice paddies, reflecting the sky with rice growing in the water, right before which voluminous, sun-dried stalks of rapeseeds are piled in the field with a golden color; different vegetables in the field are usually the central issue during visitors chats; the manure pile frequently gathers visitors, although it doesn't smell pleasant.

To avoid reducing an integrated system into isolated elements, the broader notion of place, the totality of the landscape, is also considered an important artifact that plays in this network. There is clearly place-attachment expressed by urban farmers; for example, they dream about the fields and find strength once their feet stand in this piece of land (see interview with April, May 19, 2012). Other research participants report that they have an ineffable feeling toward the village, such as Fish's experience.

Other than physical artifacts, I would argue that the emotionscapes such as the peacefulness and a sense of accomplishment also compose one of the two-way interactions between this landscape and outside participants. People, interest and curiosity are brought into this landscape, and the emotionscapes are taken back with people, improving their well-being even when they are out of this physical landscape.

5.2 Analysis of processes and emergent themes

From the forming process of the community, some themes emerged as salient phenomena that are therapeutic on both individual and community levels. In the context of the fragmented social relationships and the collapsing of communities in contemporary China, these themes of connections between various entities and groups resist the distressing social background and also provide alternatives to the dominant lifestyle and ways of existence for individuals and communities.

5.2.1 Connections among individuals

Contrasted to the collapse of community and inter-human interactions in modern society (Clapp 1978; Simmel 1997; Thompson 2009), people build up connections among one other in the process of participating in this community and benefit in various ways. As depicted at the beginning of the first chapter, by working in the field, people show up in this shared space and meet one another in a healthy and friendly way.

Fish, a college student in a university based in Chengdu and also a students' environmental association leader, attributes his enthusiasm for farming in this village to making friends in this

process. He has been farming here for several months since March 2012. The starting point has been that his association initiated this program.

“Every time after working in the field I feel happy. And I got to know some good friends. I knew some of them before this program but some through it. We bike here together (it takes two hours to get here from school) and work together, and we share our fruits. In these pure processes (without conflict of interests) our friendship grows naturally. Every time, we are very happy... Oh, I remember there was one time on our way here there was a lot of trouble; there were some twenty of us and someone’s tire broke... (With this hardship) we helped each other to get here, and, in this way, got a new experience and were instead happier.”

A survey in 29 Asian countries indicates that social trusts is significantly associated with individual well-being (Tokuda et al. 2010). Besides friendship between these individual or peripheral participants, most urban farmers express an intimate and trustful relationship with the host family. It is particularly encouraging in contrast to the prevalent phenomenon that most urban people don’t trust farmers, stereotyping them as deceiving and only wanting benefits from well-to-do urbanites. The vivid scene of people working together in the field and chatting freely with one other is inspiring, too (Figure 21). These are mostly middle-aged, urban, white-collar workers, who are viewed as the pillars of the society and have the least sense of humor ability to relax.



Figure 21. Urban farmers working together in the field.

Psychologists consider affiliation with others as a basic human coping response for managing a broad array of stressful circumstances. Affiliating with others is both psychologically and biologically comforting (Taylor 2011, 86). As discussed in Chapter 2, the rapidly changing urban world triggers anxiety, numbness and uncertainty, and this case provides possible coping mechanism to these challenging situations by connecting to others.

5.2.2 Connections between generations

Most urban farmers describe educating children with the knowledge of nature and taking kids here to play as one of the most important incentives of farming here. “We rent this lot for her (her granddaughter who is five years old) and her favorite activity is to play with the dirt. Otherwise we would not have done so.” (Interview with anonymous urban farmer, May 13,

2012) There are also a big group of people farming or subscribing vegetables because of concerns for children's food safety. As described above, parents organize summer camps for children as a healthy way to spend summer vacation. Children bike together and work in the fields with adults. Waldorf School students spend time with farmers in their houses and learn farming knowledge from them in the field. In this way, instead of sitting in front of TV sets or computer screens, children get connected to older generations, and the vernacular tradition and local knowledge are better maintained.

Connections among generations on a larger, temporal scale is observed. The ancient wisdom of natural farming is inherited and resumed by current living people and shared with a larger population. Experts on traditional Chinese culture are invited to the village and communicate with the community. This connection transcends tangible or intangible temporal boundaries and associates knowledge and human interaction together in a broader scale.

5.2.3 Connections between geographic areas

Although Ningyuan is located in a hardly visible place, far from urban centers and visually humble, its influence on other areas is expanding and the exchange of people and information is burgeoning. The practice in this village has been broadly publicized in a national TV program, and various visitors from different domestic areas have been coming for experience, knowledge and even moral support. An Jinlei, an organic farming practitioner who is also famous, has visited the Chens, and they him, exchanging knowledge and experiences. Zhao Jie, an agriculture expert and devout Buddhist practitioner, disappointed with organic farming practices all over China and the current situation of her hometown, came for experiences and got inspired and confident. She has visited many farms in the country but was frustrated by their approach to organic agriculture until she visited Ningyuan. People who are interested in safe food and agriculture come to visit from different areas of the country. Media workers come to shoot documentaries and social service movies, bringing people from different geographical areas and taking ideas from here and spreading them to other places.

In addition to domestic visitors, international researchers and visitors started noticing this community and have been observing and joining their practice. University of Washington

researchers noticed this community early, right after the earthquake, through the introduction of CEPA. Students in undergraduate and graduate levels came to study on different topics, from different discipline perspectives, including anthropology, area and social studies, environmental studies, urban studies and so on. CEPA and other environmental NGOs, some of which are from Hong Kong, also brought international high school students and individual visitors from North America, Europe, and India, to this village to do community service and research, visit to satisfy curiosity, and carry out research on rural development, agriculture, and so on. I have met several individuals and groups with various interests and research agendas. One group students from Harvard University came to visit after they got to know this place through friends in environmental NGOs, with a general interest in organic farming. An activist from India has visited to investigate environmental activism, as he has worked in Nepal and was puzzled by the relationship between social inequality, Maoist revolution, and development and stability. Another student studying Chinese language in a university in Chengdu has come to write her thesis based on the practice in this village. Also introduced by NGOs, she is from Indonesia and generally interested in environmental issues. In this way, this community transcends geographical limits and connects to colleagues and friends all over the world.

5.2.4 Connections between urban and rural sectors

As discussed in the previous chapter, the urban and rural sectors in Chinese society are largely separated, physically and invisibly by the *hukou* system, influencing unequal housing conditions, social welfare policies, medical service, education systems, economic structures, and so on (Chan 1996; Chan and Li 1999).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the government's campaign to improve rural material wealth and infrastructure conditions might improve material well-being ultimately, if it succeeds. However, the Ningyuan case serves as an example of promoting self-recognition and a sense of honor and equality for the rural sector in a more direct manner. Sister Chen considers ecological agriculture a good means of urban-rural communication, boosting the confidence of farmers, who have been discriminated against in Chinese society since 1949. Conversely, urban people who visit the rural and learn from farmers would greatly reinforce farmers' self-esteem and confidence.

In the Ningyuan case, all of the Chen family's members had worked in the city and returned to the village, opposite of the general social trend. Instead, more urban people are attracted to their rural place to visit or stay. The atmosphere is full of trust and warmth and the usual inequality is not visible in this place.

In addition to exchange of human flow, products travel between urban and rural areas in this community. Because these vegetables and herbs are organically grown, the price is not cheap by any standard, but they are highly welcomed by the middle and upper classes in nearby cities, especially those who accept the Chen's ideas of a natural healthy lifestyle. As mentioned above, part of this community are parents of Waldorf School students, who are obviously marked with loose, cotton clothes, usually with patterns of natural elements such as flowers and leaves, flat shoes, and natural, uncurled, non-dyed hair. Here the two most separated social classes or groups are connected in a way that was unseen before—a way that has much to do with nature, food, and health, the most fundamental elements that sustain, secure, and nurture human life. The urban-rural gap which has existed in this country ever since the establishment of this regime and has expanded over time, is intricately filled in. In this sense, the Ningyuan case provides a positive example of a healthy community on a larger scale, uniting urban and rural areas.

5.2.5 Connections between the government and weaker participants

Buddhists, who are also participants of this community, have connections with the county government, invite a scholar teaching traditional Chinese culture to give a talk to the Education Bureau of Jiang County. They bring officials to the Chen family to have dinner after the talk. The author participates as a volunteer for the program, too. One of the organizers is Ms. Huang, who got involved in this village in various ways.

As a researcher, I had some interesting observations of the process. Mr. Liu, the speaker, asked participants if they feel peaceful and grounded in their mind, and most of them shook their heads quietly, most of whom are middle-school teachers and Education Bureau officials from all over the county. It made me worried about basic education in this country, the foundation of an ambitious nation. If its educators have no clue about the meaning of their lives, how could they educate young people of this country?

Officials from the Education Bureau visit Chen's field and are surprised that the air is so clear and the greenness so pleasing compared to the city. They express amazement by organic vegetarian food provided by the family and sigh that "this is the life for humans!" It is surprising that government officials have this comment although they are the highest social class in China. It suggests that the complex totality of human life, mostly determined by one's social status, has turned so unsatisfying even for these privileged people, not to mention ordinary individuals of the society. This social disease could be so easily cured, however, in this simple and not-so-wealthy rural area. Some of the government officials mention that this experience inspires them to integrate nature and traditional cultural education into the system and to keep contact with the community in some way.

Some of the community have connections with high officials in the government, or work in positions with authority and power, and have helped Ningyuan go through political difficulties. Some research points out that bioregionalism and being local could be an incentive for economic and political actions (Barlett 2005), which corresponds to the Ningyuan case. This community and place has survived an eviction crisis in 2008 because of their connections and political actions. Developers tried to get the use rights for the village and secure permission from the government, to force villagers to relocate. As the Chens are deeply devoted to their land, they used all of their influence and connections to halt construction and avoid eviction. As this community is composed of not only grassroots individuals and organizations but also significant figures, "they drove to the county government and lined up outside the building, arguing with them. So they eventually gave up on us." Uncle Chen told me proudly. At the time of writing this dissertation, a new round of "socialist new village reconstruction" and eviction is taking place and how the village will cope with continuous development pressure in the future is murky. A sense of place shared among local residents and geographical outsiders will hopefully galvanize resistance. The impact of the place and its processes transcends spatial limits, serving as a potent alternative to social fragmentation triggered by rapid urbanization.

5.2.6 Nature as the connector

Scholars have noticed that there is a prevalent ignorance of natural elements in the discussion of

“sense of place” (Barlett 2005, 9-11). In many cases, however, it plays a crucial role to connect people who experience the place and create a place attachment. In the Ningyuan case, nature is obviously one of the most important factors that connects individuals, different generations, people from different geographical areas, rural and urban populations, and government and residents.

Barlett (2005, 1) observed this phenomenon burgeoning in the developed world: “a surprisingly diverse group of urban grassroots efforts are building reconnection to place and to the natural world: watershed alliances, farmers markets, community gardens, the slow food movement, and urban forest restoration efforts. These activities restore a sense of place and foster a deeply meaningful renewal of relations with the earth. Their efforts resist some of the environmentally and socially destructive effects of contemporary industrial culture and economic globalization.”

The touch and inspiration of nature is described by almost every participant. Used to the noise, pollution and crowding of cities, people, once exposed to nature in a setting like Ningyuan, become more open to one another, better able to communicate. Farm produce is a good intermediary of emotional exchange, for instance as gifts, as the topic of a chat, and so on, not to mention the subscription vegetable system bringing new members as a catalyst.

Natural elements of the landscape also play a key role in connecting people as a community. Plants in the field, the water treating system, the herb garden, the soil, and the totality of these elements are main focal points for visitors; the natural experience programs primarily focused on these natural components of the farmscape. Participants are amazed with the diversity of plants, knowledge of the ecosystem and so on, sharing thoughts and experience with one another on site or later by writing reflections and sharing online. One of them was amazed by the long and complex history of tomatoes, and most of them were inspired by the productivity of the natural farming system. The cool summer night in the village and chirps of insects during the evening were used as natural background music for the farm’s concert.

Vegetables and herbs are natural elements from the field that bring community members together. Vegetables sent to urban neighborhoods and left at the entrance, as well as vegetables growing in the field, are topics for interested people, including community members and

potential ones. Herbs grown by Sister Chen drew her closer to Waldorf School parents and other patrons. The soil, the water, and the whole ecosystem in the village play similar roles.

The summer children's program employs nature as the attraction for them, drawing them away from TV sets, computers and air conditioning at home. Weeding in the field with other kids and foreign students gives them opportunities to communicate with peers, and one of them was inspired about being independent and figured out her goal of life: "I would like to travel around the world and experience the world in various ways, just like what the foreign students do." With this goal established, her life has become more directed and her parents feel relief. Bicycling between the village and their homes gives them a chance to experience nature in another way and have a different body rhythm. Being caught in the rain gave them an opportunity to assist one another and get to the destination together. On their way back home at night, the bright moon was a wonder for them, who live in polluted urban areas and don't see the moon very often.

5.2.7 Weaving actors and artifacts to create narratives and ethos

In addition to the natural elements of the landscape, the community pays special attention to the idea of natural living and healthy lifestyle, caring for others and caring for nature. Black Soil has the slogan "being thrifty, clearing the mind, sharing with people and protecting nature", and connecting with nature was brought to international conferences by them (the 6th Pacific Rim Community Design Network Conference in Seoul, Korea, August 2012).

The Chen Family also pays particular attention to their ideas of natural farming. They are specific with the term: instead of using "organic farming" they insist on "natural vegetables", because organic product is legally defined and regulated, while as mentioned in previous chapters, their products are not certified by any institution. At the same time, they are aware that according to international standards of organic food, their land has not been transformed and stayed natural for long enough. To avoid misleading people, they are honest with their patrons that their products are not organic but naturally grown. Besides, they require that every subscriber for their vegetables has to come to their field and observe them farm, and only in this way can they subscribe to their vegetables. They stick to this rule even at the risk of alienating some potential customers. They believe that only people who agree with their ideas would

understand and support their farming practices, instead of a simple producer-customer relationship. And they believe to a large extent that their family farm is a public place for environmental education, not only catering for visitors. And they enthusiastically participate in experience exchange and sharing knowledge and ideas. Members of the community also emphasize their ideas in communicating with people, as without the ideas, the physical landscape would lose meaning and not be so appealing. Books that inspire the community are an important catalyst in the dynamics of the network. They carry the ideas and the spirit of the core family and the shared values and draw people with the same ideas to the community. For instance, Fukuoka's books brought the core family to natural farming practice, and connected researchers like me with them.

Besides verbal communication, the family really lives out its ideas and is very rigorous with vegetables they deliver to cities. They require that all potential consumers come to their field to see their work; they don't have a certified organic label but in this way costumers trust them and a community has formed around them. Every Monday and Thursday they prepare for produce they will deliver on the next day. Any vegetables with defects or with cosmetic blemishes will not be delivered. Usually, consumers get more than what they are supposed to, either in terms of quantity or variety. The family's principle is that they would never shortchange others or leave them in disadvantaged positions.

With considerable practice and sticking to their ideology, the community has attracted an expanding group. In communicating with first-time visitors, the family explains the basic principles of organic farming and living harmoniously with nature. Although different members have different emphases in life, for instance, parents focus on secure food, the Waldorf School focuses on the importance of physical work for human development, and so on, the shared act of farming composes the core ethos of the community.

5.2.8 Opening of the core family

Another important factor in the forming and practicing of the community is the opening of the core family. Whoever comes is warmly received; visitors get a cup of fresh stevia tea from Ms. Chen's herb garden, and Uncle Chen or Auntie Huang drag a stool and sit down, talking to the

newcomer in an open and friendly manner.

The family is so eager to take in information from all manners of visitors, gaining large amounts of knowledge in a fairly short period of time. From agricultural experts to international researchers, from lay people who have no idea about organic farming to environmental NGO staff, various perspectives have been brought to the village. Now their language is punctuated with academic terms in the right places, improving communication with people from outside even more. Now urban visitors are educated by them instead, and in this way they have a very different view of the countryside and peasants.

They don't reject anybody, even people who come to take things from the field without notifying them. They believe in the act that they do upright things and let others do whatever they want, and everyone deserves fair treatment. They don't reject ideas either, before reflecting on and carefully selecting them. Their openness thus helps the forming of the community in various ways.

Studies on the food system show that even in modern global markets “the innovations that make long-distance food trades technically feasible have not rendered personal trust unimportant. Rather, they have made it matter in different places and relationships.” (Freidberg 2004, 11) On a smaller scale, the Ningyuan case is even more relevant in that its ethos is open, trustworthy and accepting. This community has found a better sense of security and direction than others who are struggling with confusion and existential homelessness, and their openness in this way deeply benefits the forming and practicing of the community.

In terms of existential homelessness and at-homeness, Heidegger discusses how a host's openness helps with those homeless or on proceeding home. “Along with the displaced there are hosts, who also have capacities and responsibilities. While those who are homeless need to take into account the limits of their capability—which they nonetheless depend upon, as a necessary gift—those of us called upon to open ourselves as hosts and to give what is needed must learn to do so, first of all by becoming aware of the relation that necessarily obtains for there to be a gathering together into/as homecoming, of our own situation as ‘homed’ and of our obligations as such.” (Mugerauer 2008, 549)

Although the Chens and the local peasants do not have a stable or secure home status, as their land is being threatened by urbanization and developers, their rights to farming are vulnerable to impacts from the government, and their income and quality of life depend on the weather and other natural factors. Yet, at this moment, they stay in the current home, in the cycle of being at home, displaced or homeless, searching for the new home, and home-coming again (Seamon 1985). They live up to the responsibility that “those with resources need to accept and to prepare a place and to stay for those in need, which would only be possible insofar as the hosts are capable of offering such a gift. Such an opening requires that the hosts possess an inner security, as happens only if they shelter their historical uniqueness, knowing how to protect their boundaries and differences. For this to happen we at home (and for our own homecoming) must, in turn, take up the three tasks: dealing with our situation (as hosts), opening to the new (with multiplicity side by side or hybridity), and gathering, safe keeping, and treasuring our own set of customs, beliefs, and artistic inheritance.” (Mugerauer 2008, 549)

Chapter 6. Theoretical Reflections

With the image of this landscape depicted, and its formation process traced in previous chapters, this chapter reflects on existing therapeutic landscape theories that are relevant to this specific case and research, examining whether and in what way these theories apply to this context, and how this case supports and might also challenge these theories. Most prevalent therapeutic landscapes themes expressed in current literature can be identified in this case study, too; yet at the same time, the specific social and cultural context of contemporary China poses new questions and provides new phenomena for the academic field of healing landscapes. Potential new territories are worth exploring, and some limits of existing bodies of literature should be recognized.

6.1 Consistency with existing research on therapeutic landscapes and experience

Recently, healing gardens, therapeutic landscapes and other similar terms have caught more attention of academia and research in this field has grown rapidly. This section will investigate how the Ningyuan case agrees with and challenges existing empirical studies and theoretical basis in this field.

Theories of embodied experience of place (Casey 1993; Malpas 1999; Merleau-Ponty 1962) are well reflected in this case. People report to be aware of the air, the temperature, the feeling of fingers in the dirt, the surrounding environment such as plants, flowers, animals and other people. Different travel modes to the site lead people to reflect on their lifestyle and ways of recreation (see interview with Fish on his bicycling trip to the village). They build up emotional connections with the site so that they feel as if going home when they go to the village (see April's reflections on her place attachment to this village). In this way, they make meaning out of the place and anchor their existence on the basis of perception and experience of landscapes on site. Some people feel they have strength and are empowered when they work with the land and food (such as Lin Fan's farming experience). Besides, some of the participants have established a loose identity of "urban farmers" which ties them to other participants, who collectively formed a community around the place.

Several common themes are reported as either environmental triggers or healing outcomes of therapeutic landscape experience, which are also observed in Ningyuan case. According to Kaplan's theory of different healing levels (1989), being away from everyday life and spending time alone in solitude provide opportunity for clearing the mind and restoring directed attention (Conradson 2005; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Kaplan 1989; Lewis 1990; Marcus and Barnes 1999; Milligan 2004; Williams 2010). Peace, tranquility, and joy are experienced by subjects. Moreover, solitude provides the opportunity to reflect on one's life and wider context of the world, which is deeply healing. As mentioned in Chapter 1, connection in various forms is an important theme associated with therapeutic landscape experiences (Conradson 2005; Curtis 2010; De Botton 2002; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2010; Hoshino 2007; Jackson 1995; Kaplan 1989; Lewis 1990; MacCannell 1990; Milligan 2004; Schmidt and Little 2007; Seamon and Mugerauer 1985; Ulrich 1999; Williams 2010). Self-growth and a sense of fulfillment are also mentioned in therapeutic landscape experiences (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2010; Hoshino 2007; Kaplan 1989; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987; Milligan 2004). Newness, nature, solitude, challenge, etc., are all reflected in the Ningyuan case, too. The following discussion will focus on specific situations in the Chinese context and unique themes in Ningyuan.

6.2 Organic farming in Ningyuan: an emerging therapeutic landscape

In addition to existing theories of therapeutic landscape experience, this section will draw insights from other theoretical narratives to reflect on the Ningyuan case, which is an integration of organic or natural farming, CSA, and sustainable and intentional community building. Organic farming as non-farmers' practice has just emerged in China, with the awakening ecological awareness and worsening food safety conditions. The garden as a metaphor of Eden, as mythical healing places in different religious and cultural traditions (Marcus 1990), as restorative places (Kaplan 1989), and as space for political actions (MacCannell 1990; Severson 1990; Treib 1990) has been explored in the western context. It provides an environment for solitude to avoid the "cheap society" (Thoreau 1951) with crowding, noise, and meaningless chatting, but also provides opportunities for gathering and community. Vegetation appeases the sensory fatigue and wounds, and tactile contact and bodily work result in a sense of fulfillment. Organic farming is

particularly therapeutic as people grow with the power and pace of nature, and in this way farming ultimately leads to spiritual growth (Francis and Hester 1990). Besides, gardening is also empowerment and rerooting oneself in the volatile world.

Although empirical studies in this area are rare in China, Ningyuan Village is observed as a site for therapeutic experience, based on interviews carried out in this research. It has attracted urban farmers, artists, environmentalists, and advocates for organic farming from domestic and international environments. The peacefulness and natural beauty, intimate physical contact with the land, sense of community among participants, inspiration and sense of achievement derived from farming have been observed by the owner of the farm. I consider organic farming in rural areas to play an especially important role as a political action, as farmers and the rural sector have been despised and looked down upon, while urban residents suffer objectification from state and capital control. Both of them could gain a sense of identity and social healing from being present in the farm and actively practicing in gardening. The farming landscape serves as a counter-space (Kahn 2011) to show resistance to the dominant attitudes, and the present, moving and acting body is the crucial medium between the potential healing landscape and the healed consciousness. The farm is also a probable space of appearance (Arendt 1959), where people show up and disclose themselves as they are to one another, so that they free themselves from segregation, mutual fear and suspicion. As one of the approaches of totalitarian regimes is to make its people afraid of each other, this space of appearance provides opportunities for people to be open, to trust, and to be connected to one another, so that bottom-up communities can be formed to resist hegemonic power. China is not considered a totalitarian regime anymore, but the similar strategies, such as thought control, information control, and ideology promotion, are worth contemplating from the perspective of Arendt's.

There is not much research found in current human conditions in Chinese context, and more investigation into this area is undoubtedly necessary. Although studies on contemporary therapeutic landscape experience are absent, an exploration into classical literature might be fruitful and informing this research. Further research for literature could also include experience of agricultural tourism if organic farming is viewed as a form of tourism. The psychological process of "words and deeds" in public realms will inform further research in political aspects of

therapeutic landscapes. Studies on how places encourage active engagement and authentic relationships with place are helpful to understand supportive therapeutic landscape planning and design.

6.2.1 Implications for therapeutic landscapes: physical, social/cultural, and symbolic

After examining basic concepts, theories and empirical evidences of therapeutic landscape experience, this specific case in contemporary China will be looked at through the lens of existing literature in the Western context. Theoretical and practical potentials and challenges of these practices to facilitate therapeutic landscape experience will be discussed.

In terms of physical dimensions of the landscape, most informants report that the clear air on site, the existence of natural elements such as plants, the soil, the sound of the water in the river, etc. yield a relaxing and regenerating feeling, that help to create a sense of health. The presence of the view of greenness, the sound of birds and insects, the smell of herbs and other plants, and the integrated pattern of *linpan* landscapes, all contribute to the therapeutic experiences. This regenerative sensation largely agrees with existing literature on therapeutic landscapes. Some people simply find it reassuring to be able to see plants growing and get food from the physical surroundings.

Physical elements, however, are not particularly emphasized by most participants in the farming program, compared to the social and cultural dimensions of the landscape of the village. Many mentioned that the social setting, including the hosting family, fellow farmers and environmental NGO workers are honest, warm, and friendly, facilitating a feeling of home that other places don't provide. Some commented on better opportunities to make real friends here in the natural setting instead of relationships of interests in cities. As described in previous chapters, experiences farming in Ningyuan with the Chen Family can resuscitate memories of childhood and adolescence. From the tour in Ningyuan described in Chapter 3, the physical landscape is humble and not greatly distinct from other *linpan* landscapes in this region. Spatial features certainly play an important role in therapeutic landscape experience, such as the trail around the village covered by bamboos and plants, the meandering river, natural beauty of crops, and birds and insects, but other elements of this landscape are significant components, too.

Symbolic elements of the landscape are also reflected on by many research participants. The land is viewed as tolerant and accepting, warm and supportive compared to the human world. Some participants gain strength and feel anchored, empowered and independent from just standing on the land, as reflected in the interviews. Seeing natural changes and transition yields pleasing sensations, inspiring awe and a sense of synchronization with a larger system.

The other finding of this case is that different individuals have different experiences of the landscapes. They focus on different aspects of the place or experience the place from different perspectives, depending on the situation they are in, previous experiences they have, and different backgrounds they have.

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that besides the physical existence of space and place, the interaction with landscapes and the individual who experiences the landscape also play important roles in therapeutic landscape experience, which is supported by existing theories in this field. Besides environmental, social and symbolic dimensions of therapeutic landscapes, Conradson (2005) argues that the embodied self-landscape encounter, or the way people experience landscapes is another important element that facilitates the healing outcome. With Massey's relational idea of space as events and processes (2005), therapeutic places can be understood as a complex system of action and engagement. Consciousness, subjectivity and self-identity are grounded in place and constituted through bodily interaction with objects and other people, hence therapeutic landscape experiences are embodied, lived and practiced concretely in place.

Bodily engagement, physical effort and therapeutic experience during gardening processes are widely recorded. Physically being in the garden is important, as are the smells, sounds, and tactile contact of gardening. In this way, people connect to the land and themselves (Francis and Hester 1990). Tuan (1990) discusses farmers' physical intimacy with the material world and topophilia, in the sense that the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope.

Findings from this case support this claim. Older people gain the feeling of achievement through sensory engagement in gardening, being bodily present in the garden. The activity of planning, digging, planting, watering and harvesting offers opportunities of peace, tranquility and

exhilaration. People benefit from the creativity involved and the “satisfaction of the work,” enjoying “the hands on things” (Milligan 2004, 1788-1789). Gardening activity also provides potential feelings of empowerment (MacCannel 1990), contributing to the society (Severson 1990), and pride (Lewis 1990). Besides, social support gained from community gardening makes people feel at home (Milligan 2004). Organic gardening without chemicals particularly benefits participants, because the order and power of nature is more revealed and people get a quasi-religious or spiritual feeling from it (Kaplan and Kaplan 1990).

Compared to physical movement, the site of gardening is spatially static, but the practice is an inner journey into time; inner expansion and growth and embodied experience of time being the features of therapeutic experience in gardening. As Tuan (1990) suggests, “his [*sic*] life is harnessed to the great cycles of nature; it is rooted in the birth, growth, and death of living things; it boasts a seriousness that few other occupations can match (1990, 98).” Norberg-Schulz (1980) also notices that seeing the growth of plants, people experience empathy with a larger, interdependent system of living beings... Journeying with time inwardly, people get healed, finding their place and home in the world. Almost all these themes can be found in this specific case, too.

6.2.2 The care of the self and the resistance to the system

In addition to existing therapeutic landscape research, certain aspects in the Ningyuan case suggest new avenues to look at the influence of peri-urban farming on human well-being in the context of urbanization. As discussed in previous chapters, social, economic and cultural context, or the ethos of a specific time in a society largely influence individuals’ overall well-being. Fierce competition among individuals, the embedded neoliberal belief that individual success ensures happiness and completely relies on personal efforts, the ever-expanding urban-rural disparity, the generally widening gap between the rich and the poor on the national level, and the clear-cut difference in social status between different groups contribute to the general dissatisfaction, the feeling of being powerless, and other negative emotions and well-being status. Some research and theories concerning larger social context instead of only gardens or landscapes are inspiring and help to understand certain phenomena in this case.

Individual healing, which is actively engaging oneself with therapeutic landscapes to get health benefit is a Foucauldian aesthetics of existence that cares for the self, practices on self, cultivates the self, processes that can build a relationship with the self and regain one's subjectivity (Foucault 1988; 1990). It is also a form of resistance to dominant moral codes and institutionalized power that tends to objectify people (Foucault 1988).

This idea can be related to Epicurus' conception of self-cultivation that applies to both individual happiness, which is one of the main goals of his philosophy, as well as gardens, as reflected in his garden school (Harrison 2008, 80). This metaphor of the garden as a place for cultivating the self is represented not only in the ancient Greek setting but also in this case in the Confucian pre-modern China (Clunas 1996) and contemporary post-socialist China.

For various concerns, including the governmental budget and the marketization ideology, the Chinese state has gradually retreated from universal welfare, housing and medical care systems and marketized these important aspects that compose citizens' everyday life and well-being (Carrillo and Duckett 2011; Duckett 2011). The share of family and the third sector have taken a large part in welfare provision from the state since the political and economic liberalization (Carrillo and Duckett 2011). With the state retrenchment as a global trend in the 1980s and the 1990s (Duckett 2011, 2), "The Chinese state's retreat from health since 1978 has been swift and thorough-going. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the state played a major role in health provision but, from the 1980s, its share of spending on health fell and China's health system became highly commercialized and partly privatized: public hospital income increasingly derived from medicine sales and patient fees, some urban public hospitals were privatized, and in the countryside private medical practice also became widespread. At the same time, more and more Chinese people were paying for their healthcare directly out of their own pockets (Duckett 2011, 1). Social expenditures, their share of total health spending fell from 43% to 26%. In contrast, there was a dramatic rise in private expenditures on health from just over 3 billion yuan in 1980 to 103 billion yuan in 2002, from 21% of total health expenditures in 1980 to 61% in 2000 (Duckett 2011, 5). It is considered a by-product of the reform and liberalization of economy (Duckett 2011, 2). Doctors are said to "serve the money" now instead of "serving the people" as they used to do (Lora-Wainwright 2011, 113-114).

This neoliberal strategy was quickly assimilated by individuals: the practice of nurturing life (*yangsheng* 养生) gained popularity widely over the country (Anagnost 2013; Farquhar and Zhang 2012) in various forms, such as dancing in the street (Chen 2010), learning medical and nutrition knowledge, self-applied massage, and skin-scraping therapy (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). Besides physical health, success in material wealth, career and social status is also taken as individual responsibility and the neoliberal logic is internalized. People have turned themselves into entrepreneurial investments (Read 2009) and given away the power of deciding their life and happiness to social judgment (Zhu 2013). As Farquhar and Zhang (2012) argued, besides the Foucauldian “care of the self” ideology, the deeply embedded traditional Chinese idea takes self-cultivation or improving as natural, and nurturing life (*yangsheng* 养生) is also a necessary part of living everyday life. While contemporary urban residents have gone back to these traditional ideas and practices of health, their rural counterparts do not have so many choices. Peasants in Sichuan basically don’t go to the hospital as long as they can “walk and eat,” because the medical system is neither affordable nor trustworthy from their points of view (Lora-Wainwright 2011).

Although the municipal government of Chengdu is trying to improve the situation with new policies, only focusing on infrastructure and “hardware” in the social system does not necessarily benefit residents who are influenced by these policies (Ye and LeGates 2013). Mistrust of the public sector in general is one important obstacle to the successful implementation even of beneficial policies. For example, Kim (2014) found that urban subscribers to CSA vegetables in Chengdu preferred this alternative to the officially certified organic food system, which they see as unreliable and easily corrupted, and lacking the “purity and autonomy” of dealing directly with CSA farmers. In the Ningyuan context, as shown in my interviews, people have started to take care of themselves by growing and harvesting their own food in this village. Having lost trust in institutions and big companies, they’ve decided that they would take responsibilities for their own health and well-being, producing their own food and practicing farming as physical exercise and recreation. Keeping a distance away from institutions and power (Foucault 1988), or silently resisting the omnipresent and permeating power relationship in social structures, the landscape of this field provides an opportunity of retreating into solitude and self-cultivation instead of the *de facto* isolation of atomized urban or high-tech cyber milieux. Actually it is the

opposite—through action and speech, participants in this landscape formed communities and have gained subjectivity.

Helphand (2006, 12) calls gardens that are created in difficult environments “defiant gardens”: they “resist not only environmental difficulty but also social, psychological, political, or economic conditions. The garden can offer an assertion, a voice for the voiceless, and involvement for the disenfranchised. Gardens can defy by their chosen location and placement in unconventional places and even in defiance of the law. Guerrilla gardeners can act out protest, demonstration, or resistance. At the extreme, gardening may even be seen by authorities as a revolutionary, even criminal, act. Eventually this rogue spirit can become institutionalized; the community garden movement derives much of its energy from the garden as an assertive action.”

6.2.3 Political action: the public realm, space of appearance, and gaining subjectivity

In addition to individuals’ resistance to the system, the garden also serves as a public realm for potential political actions. The neoliberal process turns people into tools and objects instead of individual human beings who decide their own happiness and value. This process in a way is carried out by people themselves: investing into themselves, shaping themselves into useful screws in the big machine of the economic system, evaluating themselves by criteria that are set by economic needs (Read 2009). It also influences physical space in a relentless way. Scholars point out the erosion of public space taking place in the neoliberal era, when “form follows capital”: strip malls are built and occupy suburban space, and the use of public space is largely limited (Hou 2010, 5-6).

The Chinese individuals are not only shaped by capital but also the state and political power, which try to eliminate individuality and political challenge to the current regime. The objectification of humans by state and capital influences individual and social well-being. Admittedly, most urban farmers who are involved in the farming program are from the social group that is well-off and doesn’t need to worry about basic survival. These people, however, also struggle with meaninglessness, as discussed in previous chapters, after achieving material security and decent social status. I propose that by actively engaging oneself in potential therapeutic landscapes, and remaking cultural and personal expression as political action, an

individual's healing can occur. Repeating this process, collective healing will ultimately yield substantive social change.

As opposed to individual healing, social healing takes place in spaces of appearance, where people could show up, disclose themselves to one another and eliminate mutual suspicion and fear in everyday environments. Besides, practicing organic farming could also be viewed as the care of the self and a quest of subjectivity (Foucault 1988), as a resistance to the objectification in the contemporary political and economic context.

Arendt (1959) argues against the Marxist opinion that humans are produced in the production process; instead humans are social and political subjects. Being denied as “who they are” and rendered “what they are” is deep trauma that needs to be healed. This form of healing requires not only a supportive environment, which is the public realm in Arendt's theory, but also active “words and deeds” to gain subjectivity. Not that people get rights from political struggle, but what matters is action and speech, which is deeply healing in itself. Similarly, Massey (2005) suggests that public space, always open and unfinished, is a field of multiple trajectories and negotiation, and of embodied action of different groups and possible political struggle. In this process, identity is constructed and reinforced, because “who we are depends on what we do”. Therapeutic landscapes are potential to provide this place of action and expression of different trajectories and opportunities for social healing.

Social, political healing derives from “words and deeds” in public realms. Action and speech are personal expression that affirms human subjectivity and resists objectification (Arendt 1959). Being distinct and unique persons, people make their appearance in this space of appearance and become real humans. The space of appearance as public realm eliminates isolation, mutual fear and suspicion among people. Being present and practicing in place are deeply therapeutic in this sense. Participating in organic community gardening nurtures individual caring for the self and carries with it the potential for meaningful social and political change.

Arendt (1959) defines *Vita activa* as three forms: labor, work, and action. Gardening stands as an action that provides food and sustenance, defined as labor by Arendt, but also transcends animal needs. Although it doesn't achieve the “permanence” of artwork, it creates a sanctuary or a

repose in the midst of turbulence, be it the transitory garden built by New York City homeless or gardens created by European soldiers in World War II (Harrison 2008, 42; Helphand 2006).

It provides an anchoring spot in the uncertainty of the world as well as opportunities of ease and relaxation, as reflected in my interviews. Action, says Arendt (1959) always happens between or among people. Gardening can be viewed as shared action, encouraging a common dialogue among individuals, in which all participants willingly and necessarily play key roles in tending fields. The act of gardening is a political gesture that asserts identity and subjectivity and expresses individuality to the world, especially when it is exposed to people in the public realm. It also embodies constructive collaboration for the greater good.

Community gardening has been observed as creating a sense of place and transforming the food system in some North American cases (Mares and Peña 2010). Hou (2010) pointed out that in Asian cities vibrant urban life tends to take place in back streets, alleys, and other places far from the officially controlled public space, and eventually became a “parallel universe” (2010, 4). Kim’s observation (2014) of CSA practice in Chengdu Plain revealed a desire to break free from the corrupt or compromised (“contaminated”) system of official certification, and to establish a new political space through direct, interpersonal connection and trust. In the Ningyuan case, the farm is not particularly designed by professionals but simply maintained by the hosting family with a relatively remote location and humble look, and urban farmers make changes to their plots of land, choosing the kinds of vegetables they grow, erecting fences, building frames for certain vegetables such as tomatoes and marrow squashes. Compared to neighboring villages, where fields have been cultivated to produce ornamental trees (Figure 5), plants, and flowers to cooperate with the market as a link on the supply chain that mass-produces natural products to meet luxurious needs, the existence of the field in Ningyuan and its physical and social landscape is an expression of seeking healthy, independent and sustainable lifestyle.

Hou (2010, 15) points out that “insurgent public space” is smaller in spatial terms yet grander for its significance, because it helps to destabilize the structure and relationships in the official public space and release possibilities for new interactions, functions, and meanings. Community gardens, small green spaces along the side walk, and temporary dancing space in public plazas,

can all be insurgent public space. This theory holds true in the case of Ningyuan. The field can be viewed as a similar kind of new public space, where people participate and cooperate, interacting with each other in a healthy way. It is not urban but breaks down the unhealthy barriers between urban and rural spaces, which are the product of prejudice, injustice, and officially sanctioned discrimination. As Ningyuan is exposed to mass media and has been receiving more visitors from both domestic and international backgrounds, its landscape undoubtedly serves as a potential topic and site for meaningful interlocution. People make “real friendships that are not based on mutual interest or utilitarian purposes but genuine compassion and companionship” (interview with an urban farmer) when they are real, honest humans, without the fear of the other. Moreover, in the process of creating and maintaining this landscape, participants resist the objectification from the state and capital, and their identity and subjectivity get expressed and anchored, in the process, their social and political well-being is improved.

6.2.4 Ease versus pain: experiencing contemporary place

A special theme that is worth discussing in the contemporary setting is ease and pain. Generally with the mediation of tools and machines, many possibilities are enabled, such as online communication, information exchange between distances, and cyberspaces where people make appearances. Yet embodied experience of contemporary place decreases dramatically, or is experienced in a different way compared to previous times. Physical contact with either place or other people is blunted in the modern world (Tuan 1990), and engagement with the world is more passive and protective (Sennett 1994; Simmel 1997). Farmers’ intimate experience with the land is recondite and hard to retrieve (Tuan 1990). People engage with nature less; haptic bodily experience of up and down, left and right, and front and back in climbing a mountain and journeying in wilderness diminishes. Ritualized bodily practices in space decrease with the growing disenchantment with religion, and social space is more fragmented and segregated, with the result that the “space of appearance” is decreasing too (Arendt 1959; Sennett 1994).

A lot of these changes are results of the effort of pursuing bodily ease and pleasure and avoiding pain and hardship. The urban environment protects people from painful agricultural work; efficient sanitation network, the circulation of information via various media and rapid

transportation systems increase speed and eliminates sustained, hard walking trips, at the same time, excluding deep bodily experience of space. Fragmented social space eases people from overstimulation (Sennett 1994), but weakens physical and emotional contact with other members of society. In sum, the body is set free from the pain and effort to navigate oneself and travel widely across the earth, but the loss of anchoring bodily sensations, awareness of the natural context, and fleeting social contacts leave people existentially out of place or homeless, aimlessly wandering around in a world without bodily pain and experience (Sennett 1994). As a result, experience of the present landscape is rendered absurd, confusing, and anonymous, in a word placeless (Relph 1976). Placelessness and homelessness are diseases that need to be healed.

On the contrary, Arendt suggests that the elimination of the pain and effort would rob life of its most natural pleasures and its very liveliness and vitality. “The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself is felt” (1959, 103-104). In fact, the reality of life is to be felt; vitality and liveliness can be conserved only to the extent that men are willing to take the burden, the toil and trouble of life upon themselves (104). Contemporary mass tourism on Mount Emei stands as an example of not taking the mindful position in life that Arendt describes. Only a few elderly pilgrims and travelers painfully go up the mountain but are exhausted, while most tourists were in mindless comfort provided by buses. Arendt, however, suggests a third way: meditating on pain that accompanies real change. Sennett (1994) suggests from an intersubjective perspective that human nature is the incompleteness of the body; to understand and care for others, bodily pain requires a place in which it can be acknowledged, and in which its transcendent origins become visible. The body accepting pain is ready to become a civic body, sensible to the pain of other people, presented daily on the street (376).

In sum, therapeutic landscape experience and authentic environmental meaning are not only conditioned by the environment but are a situation of “connectedness between people and their world” (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985, 4). Sites of organic community farming in China provide potentials of therapeutic landscape experience and also face challenges from state and capital control, transforming site features, and “paradox of modernity” (Oakes and Sutton 2010). Participants who travel to these places are also responsible for their experience there. Experience

of therapeutic landscapes can provide individuals challenge and self-growth, and promote active engagement the place, instead of passively escaping pain and consuming the site with desire.

6.3 Rethinking health and healing

As discussed in Chapter 2, this research treats health in an integrated way, which is broadly defined and accepted as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 2011), and this holistic view is applied by research on therapeutic landscapes. Marcus and Barnes (1999) consider a broader concept of health appropriate for different groups of patients, in which healing should not be reduced to a medical diagnosis and prescription, but obtained via an integrated physical, emotional, and spiritual quest. Curtis (2010) urges readers to consider the broader scope of mental health. Instead of only proposing drug remedies for apparent symptoms of mental illness, he criticizes the oversimplification of the mind-body separation. Day (2002) gives a phenomenological definition of healing and health, for which health is a state of renewal, balance and development, and central to healing is growth towards wholeness. Correspondingly, healing should not only be recovery from diseases, but also maintenance and promotion of health status (Conradson 2005; Milligan 2004). And the phenomenological view takes health as being-at-home in terms of the lifeworld status of individuals.

The Chinese concept of health is less curing diseases but more nurturing life, called *yangsheng* and practiced by lay people who are not medical professionals in everyday life (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). It emphasizes a status that is not only not being ill but enjoying an energetic life. The classical Chinese medical concept of “healing the not sick yet” (*zhiweibing*) treats healing as a long-term process that betters comprehensive health instead of a quick action of a surgery or the prescription of medicine.

The role of self-growth in health and healing is emphasized by Maslow (1982); self-growth, actualization, peak experience, and ego-transcendence are considered healthy states. The moments of Being and full human are the healthiest moments. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) considers free-flowing and ordered consciousness as healthy human states. All these definitions of health and healing give insights into the discussion of therapeutic landscapes.

As discussed above, what matters in therapeutic experience of organic community gardening is not so much the physical body of the landscape, but fully experiencing place in the journey, with active bodily engagement and interaction. Taking pains to experience place with all senses and intimate physical contact provide opportunities of self-awareness, connectedness, healing, growth, and meaning. In this way, bodies are anchored in the world, place-making is achieved in journeys, and existential homelessness is healed.

With the arguments developed above, it can be concluded that there are certain aspects of this specific case of therapeutic landscape experience that are not covered by the existing body of literature and research. Human health and well-being are integrated, holistic and complex, and cannot be exhausted by measurement of physical bodily conditions, such as blood pressure and heart beat. Some participants do notice that there is an ineffable sense of “feeling good, but cannot be described” (see interview with Fish). Therefore, before diving into measuring targeted values, there are broader issues representing the integrated phenomenon of human well-being that can be included in the evaluating system, such as the sense of community, social connection, the feeling of anchoring and empowering, and the political expression of individual identity and subjectivity. These are factors that even informants who experience them cannot clearly define, describe, or analyze; some of them simply said “I just feel good here and I don’t know why that is the case.” Thus the spirit of phenomenology is worth mentioning here: back to things themselves. Before anatomizing physical changes during an experience in a certain landscape, we should look at the emotional-sensory experience within the landscape, what happens to the mind-body complex and bigger socio-cultural contexts, which can hardly be delineated or quantified. Moreover, the sense of well-being is highly associated with unique individuality of each person; it is relative according to individuals’ past experience, perception, and expectation, therefore can hardly be universally delineated (Mugerauer 2010).

In recent years evidence-based design has gained more attention and popularity among architects and designers, especially in the field of healing landscapes, healthcare facilities and environments (Cama 2009; Casscells, et al.; Eagle 2008; Ferguson 2010; Marcus and Sachs 2014; McCullough 2010; Ulrich 1999; Verderber 2005). Accordingly, researchers tend to employ this approach to support their argument with evidence based on large samples and statistical data.

These researches rely on surveys or post-occupancy evaluation (POE) to scrutinize users' experiences and preferences concerning color, light, shape, density, plants, slopes, materials, openness, complexity, etc. of the environment or landscapes. In terms of therapeutic landscape experience, most research focuses on the physical healing level, such as measuring blood pressure, heart beat and so on to prove health benefits from the settings. To a large extent these studies provide empirical data and evidence to prove or disprove assumptions and design approaches that are applied to therapeutic landscapes projects, involve users and take into account their needs and feedback, and establish logical connections between people and landscapes.

This case serves as a substantiated reminder that various perspectives, approaches, and methods are needed in the field or discipline of therapeutic landscapes. Evidence-based design and research seem more defensible based on large samples and quantitative statistical data, but do not take into account questions they do not ask, which might be quite important. They investigate questions in a territory that is relatively easy, clear, and defined. There are questions, however, concerning therapeutic landscapes that cannot be answered when the totality of people's experience is separated into parts and then analyzed. Analytical and Gestalt perspectives are both constructive but in different areas. It is helpful for researchers and scholars to be aware that studies that do not employ the evidence-based design approach are not necessarily less scientific or accurate, and different methods need to be juxtaposed to represent the complete picture of therapeutic landscape experience.

A more precise understanding of evidence-based design should be grounded in *phronesis*, or practical wisdom; here evidence is accumulated in experience, and the expertise of designers and planners are from practical knowledge instead of designed experiments with control groups. Maybe that is why sometimes indigenous knowledge from farmers produces better design and planning than professionals. New Socialist Village Construction lacks the perspective of *phronesis* in most places where it is implemented, which is one of the reasons for the resulting massive scale of urbanization instead of healthy rural development. In Ningyuan Village, the *linpan* landscape evolves with local farmers' everyday life instead of being comprehensively planned by technical experts, however it is much more enjoyable than neighboring villages that

were newly designed and built by planners from Chengdu, as a product of New Socialist Village Construction projects. It serves a positive example of real evidence-based design that originates from solid, embodied, and practiced evidence and wisdom.

6.4 Homecoming

Heidegger considered that human society was experiencing widespread uprootedness and existential crisis, physically, psychologically and culturally (Mugerauer 1994; 2008). The Ningyuan case also shows that material wealth does not solve the prevalent feeling of meaninglessness, the possibly inherent experience of existential dissatisfaction, and existential incompleteness (Jackson 2011). People in higher positions in the social and economic hierarchy seek meaning and psychological satisfaction, while those in lower positions look for respect, equality and acceptance. The search for the “repose in the midst of turbulence” (Harrison 2008, 42), the anchoring point in the uncertain world, both inside and outside individuals, seeking the existential home, has been undertaken by Europeans in Heidegger’s time and individuals in this contemporary southwest Chinese case.

To achieve at-homeness or the Heideggerian concept of authenticity, however, is not the pleasant but mindless status of being at ease, which is largely determined by the external world and out of control by individuals (Heidegger 1962). Mugerauer (2008) summarizes that Heidegger’s journey through cultural and individual homelessness shows that the displaced ones can at least take some critical approaches to achieving, including: (i) face and deal with their situation, whether by experiencing some beauty or other value there, creating something worthwhile, or adjusting attitudes; (ii) open to the new; and (iii) hold on to and preserve their inheritance (Mugerauer 1994; 2008, 546).

From this specific case, to face and deal with situations, either creating or accepting the new or keeping the inheritance or tradition, several ways of connection emerge as the main themes that are reflected in the practice of searching for well-being and at-homeness.

6.4.1 Connecting to senses

To face and deal with their situations, people have to really experience the reality, the sensory, bodily reality that is received by senses. Scholars criticize the modern experience of the senses that it tends to be disciplined and shaped by space and objects, but diminishes over time. For instance the space in modern homes is divided according to different functions and the body is trained to regulate its moving between rooms to perform different activities, and postures have to suit the space (Classen 2012, 186). Didactic, institutionalized spaces like museums and prisons have the same effect. As human beings have bodies, the need to touch and physical intimacy is so fundamental, however the separation between bodies and the faint of touch in modern space adds to this phenomenon, as a result, even the department store serves as a place where people can have hands-on experience and touch objects in their surrounding space (Classen 2012), to satisfy their “tactile hunger.” The new sense of personal privacy in modernity made people more reluctant to share their lives and bodies with others; although in rural villages people wake up in the morning by the bell of the church or birds instead of industrial noise, village life is too intrusive for people who enjoy anonymity of the crowd (Classen 2012, 178). For urban dwellers, life ends up as a flâneur wandering in the streets, isolated from people, experiencing high speed that doesn’t allow time or mindspace to really engage with sensory experiences, and industrial materials that are inorganic, unresponsive, and alien in tactility. The use of a train for travel, the use of machines at work, all of the modern innovations that created a gap between the body and the natural world contributed to a sense of being out of touch with the Earth (Classen 2012, 180). In modern times, machines made people act like machines and work with machines. It became necessary for the rhythms of the body to be attuned to the rhythms of the machinery, either in factories or in other occasions working with technology and facilities (Classen 2012, 169).

In the Ningyuan case, people’s narratives reflected the importance of getting reconnected to bodily senses of nature: the touch of the soil, the smell of plants and herbs, the feeling of mild breeze in the face, the heat and sweat in a summer afternoon, the sound of conversations between farmers, the slower pace of nature all contribute to the grounding feeling of themselves and their surrounding environment. Facing the hard reality helps one to get back to the physical and psychological home.

6.4.2 Connected by artifacts

Latour (2007) pointed out that ANT gives importance to artifacts and acknowledges their influence on actor networks. In the Ningyuan case, people are connected by physical artifacts in their surrounding environments, including the land, gardening tools, plant seeds, bicycles they ride on, buckets that carry water to the field, and the landscape as a whole. Through the intermediary of these artifacts the community was built and a sense of at-homeness was achieved.

For displaced immigrants, “when the human community failed them, the community of the land did not. The garden is where they have claimed, or reclaimed, a just and good relationship to the earth. It is where they affirm a sense of who they are and where they come from. When they were compelled to make a new life in a place where no one spoke their language or knew how to pronounce their names, the earth responded to their knowing hands... in their gardens, they are home” (Klindienst 2006, 242). Here the land or the earth serves as a mediator between the human and the natural world in the bigger system where people find a sense of anchoring and at-homeness.

Vegetables delivered to subscribers are important mediators in this network too. Although it is not explicitly expressed by my research participants, this feeling of connectedness is observed in a similar context:

“I hold it with both hands and smell it, my eyes closed, the cool leaves against my face. When I am home, standing at the counter cutting up this cilantro for supper, I will know exactly who grew it, where, and when. I will see Edwin (the grower)'s face, radiant, and feel the strength of his generosity to me. I will remember the dark earth between the evenly spaced plants of his beautiful garden, how the herbs are sown in generations. I will savor the welcome this gift signifies, the gesture of acceptance Edwin offered me. I am the stranger here; for Edwin, this is an extension of home. When the gift becomes part of my evening meal, the ancient rite of gift-giving, the sharing of food to establish community, has been restored” (Klindienst 2006, 207).

6.4.3 Connected to place

As discussed above, with the body deprived of pain, meaningful experience of place decreases, yielding the mind left homeless. Mugerauer (2008) points out that homelessness or displacement is one of the existential problems facing human beings. Scholars call for an experiential and existential at-homeness and “authentic place-making” (Relph 1976). However, existentially being at home and getting healed in place-making are not in conflict with the journey, but the very possibility of being at home roots in bodily engagement and deep experience of place.

Jackson suggests that “a sense of home is grounded less in a place per se than in the activity that goes on in a place. This fusion is felt in bodily praxis (1995, 148).” Casey (1993) argues that journeys inherently immerse us in places and movement is intrinsic to places through bodily engagement and perception or experience; the dialectic of here and there, near and far, permanent and transitory, movement and stillness subtends the progress of any journey and life. In a broader sense, “not to keep moving on, responsive to change at every step, is to risk being bound to a false and delimited ego-self that is stuck in place” (Casey 1993, 309). He further proposes that to throw away the ego-self but to maintain the Great Self is the way to be existentially at home. This is even truer if we listen to Australian aboriginals’ words that “man’s [*sic*] real life is not a house, but the Road...life itself is a journey to be walked on foot” (Jackson 1995, 74). Bravely facing and actively engaging with possible bodily pains and challenges in the journey, not being constrained with sensations blunted by the pleasant house, is one of the ways to get healed from existential homelessness. From this perspective, Ningyuan and their agricultural field are a place of and for relations that ground and anchor people physically, psychologically and existentially.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Primary findings

The approach of this research is to explore complex contexts and phenomena in a phenomenological way, and to create “thick description” of the lifeworld. Concerning the rich experiences and stories of this rural village, its landscape, and the community emplaced in this space, themes emerged from interviews, participatory observation, and critical dialogues. They address the issue of therapeutic landscape experience, the focus of this research, in various aspects and on different levels.

Referring to research questions of this study, the agricultural landscape in a peri-urban area in the investigated case does contribute to people’s sense of well-being. Concerning individual well-being, people report to have gained connection to nature, being independent and empowered, and reaching out to other members of the society, which largely benefits health status physically, psychologically, and existentially. Artifacts in the landscape, especially ordinary humble physical elements could potentially evoke positive experiences.

In terms of community well-being, major individuals and organizations, called as A-actors, laid the foundation of the community, and other actors and artifacts, called mediators, connect different parts of the network, and each member is engaged with others in various ways, and, therefore, the community is functioning with a solid, organic, and thick core, which is based on shared value and ideas. This is crystalized in Ningyuan village. Although facing the threats of the government, the market, and natural conditions, this robust structure of the community helps members improve their sense of well-being and also has profound political implications at the same time.

7.2 Consistency and discrepancy with existing theories and empirical studies

A lot of themes that are discovered by existing research on therapeutic landscape experience in the developed world resonate to this case. The connection with nature, the sense of

accomplishment, learning and growth, bodily senses of the landscape, empowerment and so on, also hold true in Ningyuan and its community members. It adds to the empirical evidence for therapeutic landscape experience in the Chinese context, and attests that these theories are not limited to the background where they originated.

This research explores bigger theoretical territories, proposing that taking care of the self, resisting hegemonic power, taking actions to express the self, and showing up in a shared space of appearance, a public space, to eliminate mutual fear, are profoundly therapeutic, and suggests that landscapes and well-being are not free from political influences and implications. Collective life and community building are as important for well-being as individual efforts and achievement, and landscapes are always already politically contested and influential.

This research also brings up questions that are largely ignored by current scholarly works, especially in the field of landscape architecture and evidence-based design. Human well-being is an extremely complex concept and always invites deeper exploration, and simple quantitative measuring can hardly achieve a comprehensive understanding of it. A better approach would employ the idea of *phronesis*, integrating experiential wisdom from practice and respecting individual needs, to design and plan better landscapes and affordances for therapeutic experience.

7.3 Implication for contemporary urbanization

Looking at the phenomenon of human well-being, this research suggests an alternative to current practice and governmental efforts on Chinese urbanization and the health aspects of it. The purpose, content, approaches, and implementation procedure of planning need to be reconsidered with a different perspective.

In addition to agricultural scale, productivity, and efficiency, which largely serve urban residents' interests, the rural sector's benefits should be taken into account in the process of urbanization, for instance, rights to land, stability of income, accessibility to health care, convenience of farming, etc. The development of agricultural land should be paid special attention to, because rural land and landscapes not only provide food production, but also promote comprehensive

well-being with its ecosystem services, for both urban and rural residents. Current policies have started to pay attention to these issues especially food safety, which is encouraging.⁶⁷

In the Ningyuan case, the involvement of environmental NGOs is undoubtedly critical, and similar civil society organizations should be engaged in general planning processes. With professional knowledge and experience and little interest-resulted-value-biases, civil society organizations, such as religious groups, stand as invaluable participants in decision-making processes. With these organizations involved in the planning landscape, this process also generally contributes to the evolvement of a more equal, open, inclusive, and ultimately, healthy society.

To concretize the ideas of New Socialist Village Construction, planning professionals should incorporate local knowledge and *phronesis* to really benefit local residents. *Phronesis* is practical thought or wisdom from practice. Universal planning knowledge or approaches might or might not work in a specific context, therefore planners and professionals should put themselves in the field, observing, experiencing, and consulting the space or landscape by themselves.

Communicating with local residents and learning local knowledge are also essential. In this way planning can find the meeting point between professional knowledge and the local condition. This position of not excluding professional or local knowledge but integrating the two gives respect and voice to individuals and communities who live in the place. It also avoids imposing the imagined universal solution to various contexts that largely differ from one another. In the Ningyuan case, the planning process should consider its uniqueness and allow room for its evolvement, although villagers' desire of staying at their current place goes against the plan for integrating rural development, or rather, urbanizing the rural area.

In terms of the procedures and planning implementation, a sense of free choice, control, independence, and empowerment is essential to well-being, as reflected in this case, as well as a feeling of acceptance, equality, and self-esteem. Accordingly, the current focus of the municipal

⁶⁷ “Zhongyang nongcun gongzuo huiyi zai Beijing juxing” 中央农村工作会议在北京举行 [Agricultural Meeting of the Central Party took place in Beijing]. 人民网 *People*, December 25, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1225/c1024-23937047.html>.

government, and of a lot of other governments, on health, quality of life, and well-being, should take into account psychological experiences in the process of urbanization, giving impacted individuals and entities a certain space of authority, free choice, and room for negotiation. It should not destroy social relations but allow grassroots participation, and therefore generates a sense of empowerment and equality. The efforts of investing in health infrastructure, hospitals, training medical care workers, and insurance are valuable with no doubt, but the implementation of these goals are not less important and should not be ignored.

7.4 Limitation and potentials

As any scholarly work, this research bears its limitation and potentials. All the interviews in this research have been translated at least twice when it is presented or represented in this text: from the local dialect to Mandarin Chinese, then to English. I have to admit that I cannot completely understand the local dialect so sometimes I have to rely on a third person's interpretation, or if the informant speaks Mandarin she would translate for me by herself. In this sense, the original text and linguistic subtlety and nuance are inevitably lost in the long research translation into English.

I believe, however, this limit does not seriously affect the nature and validity of this research. To my best knowledge, there is no obvious evidence indicating that local language and epistemological systems are in conflict with the conceptual categories employed in this research, or that the local to stop them from being effective of explanation or interpretations of this experiential phenomenon. I do not consider these so-called modern western theories are exclusively valid when applied to this case, but there is no local theory known by me that interacts with the case so well. It is not impossible that there are other theories, either from local or non-local context, that explain other aspects of this case, but referencing to the ones applied in this case is a valuable effort and academic contribution.

There might be a concern about whether this case is replicable in other contexts, as a successful example of ecological restoration and human well-being enhancement. For instance, Hale (2013) pointed out that CSA and rural reconstruction movement are facing the choice between embracing the market to develop their alternative approach to rural development, and rejecting

the market altogether. I have also observed the tension between different roles in the collective practice in Ningyuan, which in my opinion is a necessary stage in a creative process. At this stage of the research, I do not have an answer to this question yet. I have to admit that the core family is unique, compared to most peasants, as they have a strong will and belief in their practice. And their role in this community and landscape is fundamental; without their presence and effort there would not have been this whole community. It is highly based on and maintained by the host family's honesty and other community members' trust on them built over years. Trust does not build up quickly, while a lot of things are done in a rushed way in this modern scale economy.

The religious factor influencing this picture could particularly be a concern for the broader implications of this case, as China is basically considered a non-religious or even anti-religious society. Within the context where most of the population is comprised of individuals without any religious belief, the fact that the core family is dedicated Buddhists could be a limiting element. However, there could be other projections. Some scholars who study China-related issues have observed the revival of religion currently (Hargett 2006), because there is "a popular hunger for religious values and sentiments" (Kleinman 2011, 273), and a quest for "meaning in life." (Kleinman 2011, 274), which are "sought after to confront a secular world that is increasingly seen to be hypermaterialistic and wildly commercial, a world bereft of moral authority, aesthetic significance, and a spiritual center. The hyperpragmatism of everyday political life is also a stimulus for this quest." (Kleinman 2011, 273) And researchers are fully aware that the potential change cannot be underestimated (Kleinman 2011). Ningyuan is a progressive case in many aspects, including their religious attitudes. In the larger background of religious rejuvenation, it is possible that this village is a precursor of revolutionary social changes.

In addition, when a considerable section of the society has had their basic living needs met, the quest for meaning is leading them in various directions, such as environmentalism, charity, volunteering work, etc. (Kleinman 2011) It is possible that in other potential cases where religion is absent, other non-conventional driving forces would lead the attempt and create a new landscape beyond the old framework.

Another possible concern is that most urban farmers and participants are middle-class individuals, which could create a new disparity in which only well-to-do people have access to fresh air, locally-grown food, intimate social relationships, and so on. Exceptions, however, are observed. There are urban farmers from the nearby township seat, so they don't need a car but can easily bike to the field. This is an inspiring effort that could potentially be translated into the urban center and other rural areas so local people could join similar communities. In the core of an urban area, community gardens or roof gardens could be an alternative to the field in Ningyuan, keeping the functions without occupying a large area of land. Seattle's P-Patch program is an example of such community gardens in North American cities (Hou, Johnson, and Lawson 2009).

Other than the concerns above, this community is fragile to some extent, facing the threats from development promoted by the government, fluctuation of the market, and uncontrollable natural conditions. More research needs to be done to have a better understanding of resilient communities and landscapes. Elinor Ostrom's research on collective governance (1990) is inspiring, as she provides cases and necessary conditions of successful governing of "the commons." However, her research on the social ecological system is based on other areas in the world, and the cases are limited by their scale. The Ningyuan case will be a potential for research on resilient social ecological system in contemporary Chinese context and can provide empirical insights for broader scopes as well.

In sum, every case is unique and cannot be applied to other contexts without adapting to their specific conditions. However, case studies give us detailed information, thick description, and comprehensive understanding of a specific situation as a concrete universal, generating empirical insights that can be referred to when a broader context is being pondered. Ultimately, I believe there are shared themes in human nature, and that is also my motivation of conducting this research and writing this piece—

My confidence comes from the belief that all human beings resemble each other, that others carry wounds like mine—that they will therefore understand. All true literature rises from this childish, hopeful certainty that all people resemble each other. When a

writer shuts himself [sic] up in a room for years on end, with this gesture he [sic] suggests a single humanity, a world without a center. (Pamuk 2006)

These boundless waters into which writers, like fishermen, cast their lines or, like shipwrecked mariners, consign their bottled messages, are the haunts of lost soul mates, remote societies, other epochs, myriad divinities, half-forgotten events, and unconscious processes. But in every case, what moves us to write (and read what others have written) is an impulse to broaden our horizons, to reincarnate ourselves, and “satisfy our perpetual longing to be another.” (Jackson 2013, 3)

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