

The Disenchantment of Living Heritage and Ontological Security

Chinese Traditional Markets as Relational Spaces¹

An Interdisciplinary Theoretical Essay

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Abstract

As living heritage from agrarian civilisation, Chinese traditional markets are not merely sites of everyday exchange. They are relational spaces that sustain multiple forms of social connection. The transformation and disenchantment of such markets shape chains of personalised trust, weak-tie sociability, the restoration of human nature, and everyday choices concerning production and life. Field-oriented observations in China suggest that, as urbanisation advances, the disenchantment of Chinese traditional markets has produced social, psychological and practical difficulties. In a period of intensified uncertainty, the stability of everyday life is increasingly disturbed and diffuse anxiety has become more visible. Although Chinese traditional markets appear small and marginal within contemporary large-scale systems, they operate as mechanisms of deceleration. They play an irreplaceable role in sustaining ontological security for individuals and communities. To attend to these markets is to protect ontological security, basic everyday provision and the humanistic foundations of urban life. Drawing on ecological anthropology, theories of leisure sociology, and philosophy, this article proceeds from theoretical framing to field-oriented observation, documentary analysis and conceptual synthesis. It examines the relational-spatial character of Chinese traditional markets and reassesses their historical, present and future value.

Keywords: Chinese traditional markets; living heritage; relational space; ontological security; restoration of human nature; resilient development

Introduction

Chinese traditional markets are important carriers of the natural and cultural conditions through which human beings have survived and developed. They are forms of living heritage from agrarian civilisation and crystallisations of practical human wisdom. As spatial forms rich in everyday vitality, they bear witness to a long history of coexistence between human communities and the earth. By contrast, the supermarket, which emerged from industrial society over roughly the past century, marks the rise of a modern mode of consumption shaped by standardisation, unification and technical control. The disenchantment of Chinese

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traditional markets may therefore appear to be an inevitable outcome of modernisation. Yet their fate is more complex than a simple narrative of decline, because in an age of uncertainty they directly touch public anxiety about ontological security.

The emotional resonance generated by Chinese traditional markets derives from a spatial quality that differs from the dominant logic of modernity. Under the disembedding mechanisms described by Giddens, modern life is often accompanied by anonymous interpersonal relations and by the separation of social interaction from local time and place. Chinese traditional markets, by contrast, build a psychological system of security through predictable routes of everyday conduct, familiar interpersonal relations and local identification. In a mobile and risk-laden society, they give people a sense of dependable belonging. People are recognised, remembered and placed within a recurring field of relations. This micro-level experience responds to the problem of ontological security: who am I, where am I and how am I related to others? In this sense, Chinese traditional markets provide a concrete and everyday response to the question raised by Giddens: in modern society, where mobility, risk and time-space distanciation become pronounced, security depends not only on material provision but also on a deeper psychological and existential condition through which self-identity is sustained across time (Giddens 1991).

To reconsider everyday encounters and transactions in a Chinese traditional market is to examine how people construct a relational space in which humans meet nature, one another, and material things. Through this space, people experience the value and logic of ontological security in embodied form. Viewed through ecological anthropology, theories of leisure sociology, and philosophy, the Chinese traditional market allows us to reconstruct our understanding of everyday relational topology. It also reveals a social repair mechanism embedded in ordinary urban life and offers a resilient support for an uncertain future.

Research Design and Methodology

This article is a theoretical and interpretive study. It does not present a statistical test or a single-site ethnographic monograph. Its purpose is to construct an interdisciplinary explanation of Chinese traditional markets as living heritage and as relational spaces, and to clarify how such spaces contribute to ontological security. The analysis combines three sources of evidence: long-term field attention to Chinese traditional markets, historical and cultural materials concerning market life, and conceptual resources from ecological anthropology, theories of leisure sociology, and philosophy.

The research procedure contains four linked stages. The first stage establishes the theoretical framework, especially the concepts of living heritage, relational space, weak ties, interaction ritual, embodiment, deceleration, and ontological security. The second stage draws on field observation and accumulated experience of Chinese traditional markets, with attention to bodily practice, face-to-face exchange, stallholder-shopper interaction, local food knowledge, seasonal rhythm, and everyday sociability. The third stage examines historical and textual materials, including Chinese artistic and urban records such as *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, the *Qianlong Map of the Capital*, and *Dumen Jilüe*, as well as comparative references such as the historical memory of *Scarborough Fair*. The fourth stage synthesises these materials into an analytic account of relational topology and evaluates the risks generated by the disenchantment of Chinese traditional markets under urbanisation, platformisation, and algorithmic consumption.

The method is therefore best described as interdisciplinary theoretical analysis grounded in field-oriented observation. The argument proceeds from everyday spatial practice to relational mechanisms and then to the broader problem of ontological security. This sequence is intended to avoid treating the Chinese traditional

market as a nostalgic object. It instead examines how a seemingly ordinary form of urban space mediates provision, trust, embodiment, local knowledge, intergenerational continuity, and social resilience.

1. Chinese Traditional Markets as Relational Spaces: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

A Chinese traditional market is a third place, a public domain outside the first place of home and the second place of work (Oldenburg 1999). It has long played an important social role. In modern life, this space is often taken for granted and appears ordinary. Yet it contains significant wisdom from agrarian civilisation. It is not only an intersection of social relations but also a setting in which repeated familiar interaction helps construct ontological security in the sense elaborated by Giddens.

The following analysis examines this relational space and its connection with ontological security from three perspectives: ecological anthropology, theories of leisure sociology, and philosophy.

1.1 Ecological Anthropology: A Space for Community Reconstitution

From the combined perspective of ecological anthropology and Goffmanian microsociology, a Chinese traditional market is both a micro-laboratory of human ecology and a site of interaction rituals filled with emotional energy and symbolic exchange (Goffman 1967; Collins 2004).

A Chinese traditional market depends on the interdependence of natural space, physical space, and social space. Its movement from material exchange to interpersonal trust can be seen first in the narrative practices of stallholders. When a stallholder says that a vegetable was grown at home or picked that morning, the statement functions as more than a sales claim. It is also a form of impression management (Goffman 1959). It gives a static object the warmth of human labour and producerly care, and it creates an interaction that may be experienced as sincere and friendly. Such interaction generates two outcomes. The first is emotional energy. Through a shared focus of attention and a common affective orientation toward fresh and natural food, stallholders and shoppers form a modest community of encounter. A simple transaction may become a familiar relation sustained by gradually accumulated trust (Collins 2004). Ontological security thereby acquires support in everyday space. The second outcome is the ritualisation of symbols. Seasonal local ingredients, distinctive forms of craft, and idioms used in trade can all become shared signs. They cultivate relations of friendliness, mutual assistance, and trust within this space.

In the contemporary period, Chinese traditional markets also resist the standardising logic of the supermarket. They interrupt the spread of homogenisation within the industrial food system and function as interfaces between town and countryside life. Through visual, olfactory, tactile, and other embodied sensory experiences, they present the cultural character of local ecology and the diversity of regional species.

This suggests that the lifeworld is a plural ontological network woven by humans, non-human beings, and things. Only by moving beyond anthropocentrism and by acknowledging the coexistence of large and small forms of life can a more complete and vital community of living be reconstructed. Human existence is not simply given in advance. It is gradually formed through interaction with food, plants, animals, and the wider ecosystem (Mol 2008). The Chinese traditional market provides an important habitat for this relational mode of existence.

1.2 Sociology of Leisure: A Site of Recreation, Emotional Relief, and Presence

Throughout history, while fulfilling the basic task expressed in the Chinese saying that food is the first necessity of the people, the Chinese traditional market has also enriched recreational space, regulated the texture of everyday life, soothed the mind, and enabled leisure. It activates basic human instincts and practical abilities connected with clothing, food, dwelling, movement, play, and enjoyment.

The Chinese artistic heritage represented by *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* offers a vivid example. In this handscroll, market life appears as a great stage of urban existence. Dense flows of people, food, drink, leisure, and entertainment intersect. These moments preserve a lively historical record of everyday life in Bianjing during the Northern Song. Another example is Dashilar in Beijing, a commercial district with a history of nearly six hundred years, located close to the former imperial city, now the Forbidden City. It was a core area where commerce, entertainment, and market activity converged. Long-standing shops stood alongside vendors moving through lanes and alleys. Xianyukou Market was especially known for the freshness and completeness of its daily goods. It served the ordinary daily life of the capital and also brought the tastes of common urban life close to the imperial city. Hospitable shopkeepers, extended Beijing-style calls, and the rhythm of street trade together formed a distinctive urban soundscape and expressed the etiquette, hospitality, composure, and leisure aesthetics of old Beijing, as recorded in the *Qianlong Map of the Capital and Dumen Jilie*.

This everyday historical vitality is not unique to China. It is a widespread human experience across time and space. In the coastal town of Scarborough in North Yorkshire, England, a large fair was held from the thirteenth century to the early seventeenth century in late summer each year and lasted for about a month and a half. It attracted merchants from many parts of Europe and was accompanied by performers and festivities. Although the fair declined in the modern period, it left behind the folk song *Scarborough Fair*. The song is marked by sadness and longing, yet it also preserves the memory of a prosperous fair and of people engaging in joyful exchange and encounter.

With the flourishing of Chinese traditional markets, new public spaces also emerged. Market exchange developed from simple barter into forms interwoven with inns, taverns, coffee houses, museums, libraries, and performances by street entertainers. This transformation greatly extended the channels through which people, objects, urban areas, and the countryside interacted. It also multiplied forms of relaxation and diversion. Even today, this spatial form and its functions continue. Through the full sensory participation of sight, hearing, touch, and smell, consumers can return from the position of passive consumer object to that of perceiving subject. Through direct bodily connection with objects, land, and nature, the Chinese traditional market provides emotional relief and pleasure for busy urban residents. It also sustains social experience and practice through plain everyday sociability, nourishes the disposition, enriches the content of life, and allows the spiritual quality of leisure to be realised.

Modern society is deeply affected by the alienations generated by acceleration, including alienation from space, things, action, time, and the self (Rosa 2010). In contrast, the Chinese traditional market offers a deceleration mechanism grounded in natural rhythm and sensory activation. Individuals may withdraw from the noisy tempo of the city and, through leisure practice, reconstruct the unity of body and mind. The market therefore repairs the integrity of everyday life and allows human nature to be more fully restored.

1.3 Philosophy: The Philosophical Tension of Chinese Traditional Markets

Marx and Engels argue in *The German Ideology* that the first premise of all human history is the existence of living human individuals (Marx and Engels 1970). The corporeal condition of the body and

everyday concern with food, fuel, and other necessities confirm the materialist understanding of history. Human beings must first obtain energy as natural beings, and they then enter material production in order to move beyond passive animal survival. This logic gives the Chinese traditional market a firm ontological position. It is a physical space that connects natural productive forces with living bodies, and it provides a primary material basis for continued human development.

The value of the Chinese traditional market extends beyond the physiological need for food. It is also a multidimensional philosophical site that resists human alienation. First, it marks a poetic return to Heideggerian dwelling (Heidegger 1971). Outside the standardised logic of the supermarket, it preserves relations between human beings and nature. It reconstructs a state of dwelling that has been obscured by technical rationality and gives temporal and spatial flexibility to an organic life attuned to seasonal rhythm. Second, it is a site where Levinasian ethics of the Other can be practised (Levinas 1969). When stallholder and shopper meet face to face, economic exchange is supplemented by moral responsiveness and sympathy. For shoppers, the face of the stallholder interrupts the silence of commodities and restores goods to the labour and life of others. Consumption may therefore become an act of recognising and understanding another person's condition of livelihood. For sellers, fair dealing and honest goods are not optional virtues. They are the ethical limit of the transaction and a commitment of respect toward the person who comes to buy.

The attraction of the Chinese traditional market also lies in its convergence of the earth's gifts and human sociability. It brings together natural life and social life. As a primary historical scene, the Chinese traditional market allows people to perceive, through embodied everyday practice with things and with others, how human life is concretely constructed and sustained. It also gives a tangible answer to the philosophical question of where human beings come from and where they are going. The answer is not only found in abstract speculation; it is made perceptible in vegetables, meals, words, and ordinary gestures.

2. Relational Logic: The Relational Topology of Chinese Traditional Markets

The perspectives of ecological anthropology, theories of leisure sociology, and philosophy reveal a decentralised network logic within the Chinese traditional market. This logic differs from the centralised and hierarchical logic of the supermarket. The relational topology of a Chinese traditional market can be clarified through several axes of connection.

Table 1. Relational topology of Chinese traditional markets

Relational axis	Main nodes and media	Typical practices	Contribution to ontological security and risk under disenchantment
Vertical relations	Producer, stallholder and shopper; food, money, narrative and trust	Inquiry, bargaining, tasting, repeated purchase and explanation of origin	Creates personalised trust and a shortened chain between production and consumption. The risk is replacement by anonymous labels, platform ratings and distant system trust.
Horizontal relations	Shoppers, neighbours, passers-by and families; weak ties, local information and informal talk	Casual conversation about prices, recipes, illness, family matters, weather and local news	Reduces isolation and supports local recognition. The risk is the loss of everyday encounter and the weakening of nearby public life.
Human-object relations	Body, food, tools and seasonal goods; embodied perception, texture, smell, freshness and tactility	Touching, smelling, comparing, choosing, cooking and remembering taste	Restores bodily competence and everyday agency. The risk is replacement by packaged commodities and the displacement of bodily judgement by technical abstraction.
Human-nature relations	Land, season, plants, animals and local ecology; seasonal rhythm, local species, freshness and cultivation knowledge	Recognising seasonal produce, asking about cultivation and following local availability	Links urban life to ecological time and material dependence. The risk is separation from land, season and food source.
Institutional and urban relations	Market managers, municipal governance, small farmers and urban shoppers; rules, space, access, livelihood and informal coordination	Maintaining stalls, resolving disputes, regulating hygiene and enabling small-scale trade	Supports livelihood security and urban resilience through low-threshold provision. The risk is one-size-fits-all clearance, over-standardised upgrading and the loss of non-quantified value.
Temporal relations	Elders, younger shoppers, memory, custom and future risk; ritual repetition, intergenerational habit and local memory	Returning to familiar stalls, passing on recipes, recalling old places and preparing for uncertainty	Maintains continuity of self and place across time. The risk is a break in urban memory and the disappearance of cultural continuity.

2.1 Vertical Relations: Personalised Chains of Production and Consumption

In vertical relations, producers and consumers are directly connected. This connection forms a shortened, activated, and personalised interaction ritual chain. Its significance lies in the replacement of invisible system guarantees and uniform commodity surfaces with interpersonal trust, local knowledge, and resilient ordinary exchange. A producer is not merely a supplier enclosed by brands and certification labels. Through face-to-face dialogue and direct sensory communication, the producer invests labour, emotion, skill, and moral character into the product, thereby generating trust based on familiar sociability. This trust arises from asking, learning, and exchanging greetings in person, and from the emotional energy accumulated through narrative and immediate feedback in each transaction.

This pathway often appears through presence, narrative, and sensory empathy in physical space. When a stallholder explains that a product was grown at home or cultivated with organic fertiliser, the static product receives a life history and human warmth. When tasting, touching, and smelling are permitted, the shopper's immediate reaction can directly adjust the transaction. Repeated visits to the same stallholder transform a casual encounter into a return-customer relationship and create a friendly connection that exceeds pure exchange.

This relation performs three functions. First, it provides the basic unit upon which other relations depend, including mutual help among stallholders, communication among shoppers, and coordination between stallholders and market managers. This basic exchange unit supplies the whole topological network with material flow, in the form of agricultural products, and energy flow, in the form of money and affect. Second, each producer is an independent node connected with a group of shoppers, forming a small star cluster. Numerous overlapping clusters are linked in parallel and together form a decentralised network topology. The network may expand, contract, or deform, while the relative relations within the space remain recognisable. Third, it is a channel through which social capital, monetary capital, and human capital are transmitted. It conveys not only goods and money but also relations of trust, local knowledge, emotional energy, and technical skill. Everyday reciprocal expressions, from concern for the hardship of a stallholder to

the promise of saving the best vegetables for a familiar shopper, generate new relational links and deposit stability, reliability, and psychological security into everyday life.

The repair function of this relation is often underestimated today. As artificial intelligence increasingly shapes the tempo of life, people are drawn into algorithmic recommendation and remote delivery. Everyday life becomes colder, more guarded, and more distant. This condition makes the ontological-security significance of the Chinese traditional market as relational space more evident.

2.2 Horizontal Relations: Weak Ties and Everyday Public Communication

Horizontal relations in a Chinese traditional market are mainly formed through accidental encounters and casual conversations in front of stalls. They are immediate, improvised, random, situated, and relatively non-instrumental forms of secondary public interaction. People of different ages, occupations, and classes gather in this space, along with families. The market thereby functions as a site of bridging connection across groups. This mode of interaction corresponds to the weak ties identified by Granovetter (1973). Such ties interrupt individual isolation and make the Chinese traditional market both a physical node in the regional social network and a living site where such relations are generated.

The content of these interactions usually concerns seasonal prices, cooking techniques, family matters, and other local information. They are low-frequency, brief, and do not require deep emotional commitment. Yet they constitute an original form of the information channels emphasised by Granovetter (1973). Through plain interpersonal contact, an abstract sociological concept becomes a tangible scene of everyday life.

The construction of weak ties has irreplaceable significance. In an age dominated by atomised modern commercial spaces, the Chinese traditional market uses low-cost, high-frequency everyday encounters to reduce estrangement within the nearby, a sphere whose neglect has been emphasised by Xiang Biao (Xiang 2021). It reconstructs community publicness and sociality and allows the ethics of co-presence with others to appear in ordinary life. As a station for information exchange, weak ties transmit local knowledge, practical skills, and health-related experience. They fill information gaps that formal channels and internet platforms often fail to cover and provide the basis for community mutual aid. At the same time, these loose but flexible links form a soft social support network. They may lead to temporary help and material assistance, and they also carry dialect, custom, and memory through everyday conversation. They strengthen local identification and allow individuals to confirm their social existence through encounters with others. In this sense, weak ties store everyday cultural capital and sustain the resilient development of cities.

2.3 Human-Object Relations: The Return of Material Presence

The relation between humans and things in a Chinese traditional market is essentially an authentic interaction that resists modern commodity alienation. It seeks to dissolve the separation between subject and object. People are no longer merely passive consumers, and objects are no longer abstract equivalents of exchange. Instead, humans and things mutually form one another through sensory and situated interaction. This distinguishes the Chinese traditional market from the procedural regulation of the supermarket.

The core of this interaction lies in the return of material presence. First, the subjectivity of things returns. A thing moves from being a technically disciplined commodity to being an object that appears in its natural form. A tomato in the supermarket is often unified by price tag and sealed packaging and is reduced to an interchangeable standing reserve. A tomato in a Chinese traditional market may have uneven shape, dew, or small scars. Its imperfection confirms its presence. In Heideggerian terms, the thing is not merely a reserved resource; it appears as a distinctive being (Heidegger 1971). Second, human embodied participation returns.

Through multisensory interaction, the body is released from the narrow identity of the shopper and enters direct connection with things. Third, relations are mutually constituted. The stallholder's account of the origin of ingredients and the shopper's questions about provenance and cooking methods turn the object from a silent entity into a carrier of narrative. Human beings and things thereby enter a reciprocal dialogue.

The human body is shaped by eating, and through eating it connects the self, society, and world. Food thus becomes an important medium. Coccia argues that our relation to things is central to what makes us human and that the world of objects can become a site of the good (Coccia 2018). Meat, poultry, fruit, vegetables, fresh food, and other goods in a Chinese traditional market make this good concrete. They prevent daily meals from becoming a merely mechanical task of survival. They make visible the dialectic of co-presence between humans and things, and between small acts and large worlds. This relation, rooted in everyday food and fuel, exceeds the function of satisfying hunger. It reveals the necessary existence of temporal rhythm and the texture of life, and it therefore becomes an indispensable part of the philosophical understanding of the human.

3. Reconstructing the Value of Ontological Security

Historically, Chinese traditional markets have long exceeded the spatial and temporal scope of daily exchange. Their social and cultural meanings cannot be fully captured by the term relational space alone. In the present condition of normalised uncertainty, their connection with ontological security has become especially salient. During the COVID-19 pandemic, neighbourhood mutual aid, the mitigation of food shortages, and warm interpersonal relations performed important functions in stabilising individual emotion, supporting urban operation, and securing basic survival.

Ontological security is not a simple combination of ontology and security. It refers to an integrated system of existence in which the foundation of individual being is embedded in social mechanisms for resisting risk. The continuation of bodily existence always presupposes a sense of security. The Chinese expression that food is the first necessity of the people means that food provision reduces psychological unease and anxiety. Even when external risks multiply and social situations become unstable, individuals can still possess a reliable support for everyday life. This stable relation of coexistence is the value core of ontological security.

3.1 For Individuals

In highly differentiated urban life, people are abstracted into consumers, workers, and sellers. In a Chinese traditional market, however, they can return to a sensory and instinctive mode of existence. When individuals weigh tomatoes by hand, exercise verbal skill in bargaining, and confirm choices by examining the texture of ingredients, a long-absent sense of competence and accomplishment can emerge. This experience differs fundamentally from clicking a one-step order in an app. It is not simply a purchase of food. It is closer to a confirmation that one is living attentively. Such minor and ordinary control is an important remedy for modern anxiety. It is also a practical setting for cultivating self-reliance. Through low-threshold social ritual, it relieves the confusion and loneliness produced by atomised existence.

This living bodily interaction also helps shape ontological selfhood, namely the confirmation of one's existence and value. It nourishes empathy and compassion in particular. Mencius's doctrine of the four moral beginnings names compassion, shame and dislike, deference and compliance, and approval and disapproval as foundational moral tendencies (Mencius, Gong Sun Chou I). In the bargaining and exchange of a Chinese traditional market, one may feel compassion for the hardship of farmers, and one may cultivate deference

and moral judgement in fair dealing. These modest moral practices make human goodness concrete and perceptible.

3.2 For Society

The social value of the Chinese traditional market lies in its construction of relational social resilience and an ethics of consumption. Even in a world of highly developed global supply chains, localised supply chains cannot be treated as dispensable. Local food systems constitute an indispensable micro-level guarantee of urban resilience. When distant shipping or cross-regional logistics is interrupted by extreme circumstances, home-grown vegetables, nearby farmland, and stallholder distribution can still help maintain basic urban provision. This deep locality is part of the city's capacity to respond to public emergencies.

The broader significance of the Chinese traditional market is that it quietly cultivates a new form of civic consciousness and ethical consumption. When consumers ask where vegetables come from or whether they were grown organically, and when they use their own shopping bags to avoid excessive packaging, consumption exceeds simple economic exchange and becomes a food-ethical practice linked to responsibility. In a period marked by food-safety anxiety, the familiar networks within Chinese traditional markets offer survival comfort based on trust. This is a core expression of cultural capital. It reduces transaction costs and, often without explicit declaration, practises social responsibility through degrowth, lower consumption, and more natural ways of living. Through sustained attention to food miles, organic cultivation, and environmental justice, public ideas about green living and sustainable development may be internalised as shared practical commitments.

3.3 For Living Heritage

A Chinese traditional market is a platform for dialogue between ancient and modern values. It continues premodern wisdom about living and etiquette in social exchange. These cultural genes, which urgently require transmission, are not only expressed in household maxims such as preparing for difficulties before they occur and remaining alert to danger in times of peace. They also construct the foundation of ontological security at the level of body and existence. Through tacit restraint on greed and excess and through everyday ethical education, the Chinese traditional market provides a stable moral anchor for settling body and mind.

This ontological security, derived from everyday ethics and self-cultivation, forms the existential basis on which the production of space described by Lefebvre can unfold (Lefebvre 1991). Under pressure from technical rationality, capital logic, and modern discipline, life becomes fragmented and uprooted, and its meaning narrows. With ordinary urban vitality as its ground, the Chinese traditional market creates within the city a gentle heterotopia. It is a non-confrontational site of settlement. Here the body pressed by efficiency can relax, life submerged by homogenisation can regain interest, and interpersonal relations severed by modernity can meet again. Through this threefold repair, individuals may recover a stable, continuous, and trustworthy sense of ontological security.

4. Chinese Traditional Markets in Disenchantment: Challenges and Turning Points

The rapid arrival of the age of artificial intelligence requires vigilance. Algorithmic recommendation hardens homogeneous consumption, while human-machine interaction may replace direct contact with mediated forms of sociality. In this context, the Chinese traditional market, as a living space based on bodily

presence and accidental encounter, may become a stronghold for resisting comprehensive digitalisation and preserving the plurality of human needs.

4.1 Challenges

First, the separation of humans from nature is a deep source of contemporary crisis. Rapid urbanisation has cut direct connections between people and land, seasonal rhythm, and food sources. People lose the roots of life and the roots of living. This separation produces three consequences. The first is ethical suspension. When food supply chains become long and complex, producers and consumers are separated by layers of mediation, and accountability dissipates. A social vacuum of responsibility is formed. The second is ecological backlash. Excessive technological intervention, land degradation, and water scarcity weaken the resilience and endurance of the global food system. Industrialised and intensive cheap food brings health risks and undermines traditional food ethics based on natural order, diligence, frugality, and moderation. People may become trapped in a path dominated by technology and capital while neglecting constraints from nature, humanity, and ethics. The third consequence is the reality of what Engels called nature's revenge upon humanity (Engels 1940). Taking Chinese statistical data as an example, from 1980 to 2025 grain output increased fivefold and meat output increased tenfold, while the costs included soil pollution, ecological imbalance, and declining food quality.

Second, technological intervention in food has brought material abundance, yet it has also contributed to declining confidence in food quality and to health anxiety. The shortening of production cycles in industrial chicken farming is often cited in public debate as an example of this unease. Public concern over what to eat has intensified. A food system governed by capital, technology, and commercial advertising exacerbates social differentiation and food-distribution injustice. Traditional values of following natural order and practising frugality are rapidly disenchanted. The expansionary logic of output and profit increases the risk of ignoring natural, human, and ethical constraints. After a series of food-safety scandals involving tainted milk powder, gutter oil, clenbuterol, additives, and related incidents, institutional trust has been seriously questioned. Individuals fall into a trust paradox. They can no longer rely fully on interpersonal trust, yet they also struggle to entrust themselves to institutional trust. As the food system becomes increasingly complex and black-boxed, health risks move away from collective guarantees and become private responsibilities. Individuals are required to interpret labels, trace origins, distinguish online rumours, and make judgements among contradictory health recommendations. This individualisation of responsibility is in effect a transfer of social risk to the individual. Under such conditions, the protection of ontological security becomes a pressing question.

Third, insufficient understanding of the problems produced by urbanisation provides legitimacy for capital and rigid urban governance. Renovation, upgrading, and rectification are then treated as the only acceptable directions. Urban planning and commercial capital privilege efficient and convenient consumption. Traditional markets are often regarded as backward and disorderly. They may be forcibly dissolved or transformed into cultural-tourism sites for visual consumption. The original relational space is compressed, and the physical field of interpersonal connection withdraws. In the pursuit of grand and polished urban forms, the city loses the breathing spaces that allow people to pause, rest, and encounter others. People may live amid prosperous consumption scenes while experiencing loneliness and disorientation. A GDP-oriented accounting system treats the employment absorption capacity of mobile vendors, their basic livelihood support for lower-income groups, and other non-explicit values as ineffective or inferior. Meanwhile, a construction enthusiasm centred on demolition and rebuilding cuts the temporal continuity of cities. Local knowledge, dialects, customs, and human relations are diluted, distorted, or

displaced by uniform urbanisation. This systematic neglect of non-quantified value uses a single economic measure to diminish the diversity and richness of urban culture.

The most troubling issue is not simply the disappearance of the Chinese traditional market. It is the loss of the capacity to criticise this disappearance. When renovation, upgrading, and rectification are unreflectively equated with development and progress, when efficiency and profit become the measures of all things, and when risk responsibility is quietly transferred to each individual, a deeper alienation appears. In a seemingly more modern and convenient life, people exchange accountability, relational trust, and bodily presence for a condition that is more isolated, more anxious, and less grounded.

4.2 Turning Points amid Disenchantment

Challenges may also generate turning points. When the problems of modernisation and urbanisation are examined more closely, the marginalised Chinese traditional market appears again as a space with endogenous repair power. This repair power has a self-growing logic and reveals a latent instinct for security in human life.

First, the Chinese traditional market has an internal function of relational repair. Its distinctive value as a foundation of urban resilience and a cradle of ethical consumption is being recognised by more people. This awakening allows the market to be understood less as a historical remnant and more as a practical support for guarding the authenticity of life and repairing relational space. More people, especially young people, are entering Chinese traditional markets. In doing so, they activate basic instincts of survival and meaning. They realise that in the everyday world of food and fuel, the ability to embrace the world, nature, and others is itself becoming scarce. The movement from observation to participation marks the beginning of possibility.

Second, semi-prepared food, pre-prepared dishes, stored food, and platform-delivered meals within the supermarket and delivery systems have generated widespread health anxiety. Industrial food is often associated in public discourse with intensive technological manipulation and artificial flavour. People have begun to recognise that long-term intake of heavily processed food with complex additives may slowly deplete the body. The fresh, non-standardised, and traceable natural ingredients of the Chinese traditional market therefore become a response to this health crisis. To choose the Chinese traditional market is, to some extent, to choose a form of ethical consumption that is more honest and responsible toward the body.

Third, after the COVID-19 pandemic, people acquired a sharp awareness of the fear and helplessness caused by food shortages. During that exceptional period, home-grown vegetables and farmer delivery helped mitigate scarcity and conveyed interpersonal warmth during isolation. The mutual assistance and care rooted in crisis memory have gradually become a form of collective consciousness. People have also recognised the vulnerability of a supermarket model highly dependent on logistics and supply chains in extreme circumstances. A Chinese traditional market rooted in the community and connected with local producers may become one of the most resilient lifelines of the city in emergencies, as well as a bottom-line system for social culture, economic form, and ecological value.

Fourth, as global climate change, extreme disasters, and geopolitical conflict intensify, crisis consciousness is shifting from passive response to active defence. Preparedness in times of peace is no longer merely an ancient injunction. It is a necessary skill of modern survival. The short supply chains, localised consumption, healthy diligence, and low-carbon living represented by the Chinese traditional market offer a practical strategy for an age of uncertainty. By rebuilding stable connections between city and countryside and between producers and consumers, the Chinese traditional market helps construct a resilient support for everyday life.

In sum, to explore the deep logic linking the relational space of the Chinese traditional market with ontological security is not an exercise in nostalgia, taste, or sentiment. It is an effort to maintain clarity in an era when artificial intelligence and algorithms increasingly capture human experience. The Chinese traditional market allows people to remain rooted in a relational space where nature, body, and community coexist. In the coordinates of land and time, people may again perceive the vividness of ordinary urban life. They can thereby touch the primary historical scene carried by the Chinese traditional market and the irreplaceable ontological security that it provides.

Conclusion

China remains characterised by the basic condition of a large country with small farmers. Approximately 203 million small farming households, accounting for more than 98 per cent of agricultural operating households, remain core subjects of everyday urban food provision (Zhong forthcoming). The Chinese traditional market, with its non-standardised, highly flexible, and low-threshold spatial form, is well suited to a dispersed and diversified smallholder production structure. It provides an important pathway for increasing small-farmer income, securing grassroots livelihoods, and sustaining positive town-country interaction. As living heritage that carries the ecological wisdom and life ethics of agrarian civilisation, it deserves a foundational position in modern urban space. Any simplified or one-size-fits-all renovation or prohibition misreads sustainable development.

Noël Coulet warned in 1967 that excessive and disorderly urban expansion was eroding embodied recognition of the value of agriculture. Xiang Biao has called for a return to the nearby in everyday life and for the reconstruction of local interpersonal connection (Xiang 2021). The Czech ecological anthropologist Petr Jehlička has also shown that the social and livelihood value carried by self-provisioning food practices has long remained outside national accounting frameworks and mainstream economic analysis. These insights have not yet been sufficiently incorporated into public policy or mainstream academic research.

For many years, urban modernisation has often been measured by GDP, efficiency, speed, and scale. This habit has made the non-explicit value carried by Chinese traditional markets across thousands of years difficult to perceive. Urban development has often pursued grand and polished spatial forms while neglecting the breathing spaces that allow people to rest, encounter others, and settle body and mind. People may also become trapped in the convenience promised by technological progress while paying the price of reduced bodily presence, weakened relational trust, and estrangement from nature. The result is a mode of existence that is more solitary, more anxious, and less grounded.

To reassess the value of the Chinese traditional market is not to indulge nostalgia or romanticise agrarian sentiment. It is a reflection on contemporary development and the unease it has produced. Why do people become indifferent to gifts from land and nature? What primordial cultural perception and survival wisdom are lost behind such indifference? Confucius states in the Analects that a person without long-range concerns will have near troubles (Analects, Wei Ling Gong). In relation to the rule that food is the first necessity of the people, this ancient saying remains forceful. Preparedness in times of peace is not groundless anxiety. It is a sober perception of vulnerability within apparent abundance. To revive the Chinese traditional market is to protect ancestral wisdom and to make a practical arrangement for long-range concerns. Only in this way can society preserve clarity, resilience, and a grounded everyday life amid the noise of technical rationality, capital logic, and consumerism.

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