Wet Markets: The Layered History and Relational Space of Everyday Life

Read *Anthropological Perspective on Wet Markets* (forthcoming book)

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A few years ago, the anthropologist Xiang Biao introduced the concept of the "nearby 500 meters," calling for greater attention to the immediate spaces and social connections in people's lives. Neighborhoods, green spaces, plants, and insects have all become vehicles for micro-exploration — yet the urban wet market, a place inseparable from daily life, has remained outside this inquiry. The wet market embodies the Chinese belief in nature & freshness; it is a material carrier that connects individuals to their community, and people to nature; it is the daily prelude to life. That it has not been included in the academic or public discourse on the "nearby 500 meters " is truly regrettable.

Recently I carefully read Professor Zhong Shuru's forthcoming book, *An Anthropological Perspective on Wet Markets* (based on more than a decade of fieldwork). I find that this new work, through an anthropological lens, illuminates a life space that modernity has overshadowed. It not only fills a structural gap in academic research on the "nearby 500 meters " and finally gives the wet market — a tangible space imbued with a philosophy of everyday life — the scholarly attention it deserves."
The book is far from a superficial look of market life. With a sharp anthropological angle, it penetrates the surface of transactions to uncover the relational space and cultural genes of the wet market. Especially against the backdrop of climate change and rising uncertainties, it offers a subversive understanding of the deep logic of modern food systems: the wet market is not only a place for trading fresh,

natural food but also a bond that sustains the Chinese "relational space" and a source of foresight and early warning to meet future challenges.

Through reading the manuscript, I have derived four core insights, which also constitute the unique strengths of this book.

I. The Insider's Perspective on Proximate Space

Zhong Shuru's research is groundbreaking, primarily because it rebels against the traditional academic disengagement. Her inquiry began with her doctoral dissertation in the United States. Over the following ten years, she visited more than 200 wet markets in over 50 Chinese cities, covering everything from coastal fishing ports to inland agricultural fairs, and from first-tier metropolises to remote towns. What is particularly valuable is that she set aside the role of "observer" and deeply immersed herself as an "insider": wearing aprons and rubber boots, she became a fish seller, a vegetable vendor, running goods to the docks, going to wholesale markets, and delivering products to customers. Through daily transactions, she gained insights into the logic of human relations and the hidden knowledge that lies behind bargaining strategies and kinship networks.

This immersive fieldwork breaks through Western frameworks of "transaction efficiency" and "spatial regulation," reaching directly into the core of China's wet markets — “关系 guanxi” (relational). She creatively proposes that "strong ties underpin the survival of stallholders, while weak ties sustain market vitality," and constructs a three-dimensional analytic framework of "people — food — place," shattering the superficial view of wet markets as mere "fresh food outlets." In her research, the wet market emerges as a composite space linking urban history with the

present, individuals with communities, and the local with the global: every transaction constructs a relationship, and every stall is a carrier of culture.

This methodology itself is a critique: when much social research either sees things without seeing people, or abstracts its subjects into data and visualisations. Through more than ten years of personal commitment, Dr. Zhong Shuru has proven that meaningful academic research must penetrate the very fabric of daily life — it must, as the saying goes, “taste the pear on one’s own tongue.”Her exploration not only gives the wet market its academic allure but also challenges the alienation of contemporary scholarship from real life. When scholars indulge in grand theories or superficial critiques, have they ignored the fact that everyday spaces hold the relational codes for understanding society?

II. The Relational Space and Social Theatre of Multiple Values

With her deep insider insights, Dr. Zhong Shuru brings to light the multiple values that have been obscured in wet markets — and these values are both a quiet resistance to modern alienation and a revelation of the ills of urbanisation.

The wet market is the material carrier of the Chinese "faith in freshness," resisting the industrial erosion of food authenticity. This "freshness" is a cultural gene rooted in agrarian civilisation — a preference for the original state unmediated by excessive intervention: the crisp tenderness of dew-covered vegetables, the springy smoothness of freshly slaughtered fish, the rich aroma of just-cut braised food — all constitute a "somatic experience" through sight, touch, taste, and smell. In the early-morning market, people touches tomatoes, sniff fish, taste fruit — this direct dialogue with ingredients transcends mere satiety, turning food into nature's gift. The ingredients pass through purchase, cooking, and

digestion, completing a dual cycle of material and emotion, maintaining the authentic bond between humans and nature. The insistence on nature and freshness in the wet market becomes a last defence against the alienation of food.

The wet market is also a wellspring of social innovation. It brings together diverse groups: older stallholders, through decades of integrity, create a sense of "human touch" and "place attachment." Their trust in regular customers — allowing credit, exchanging greetings — goes beyond buying and selling. Young people enter with creative ideas, injecting vitality by combining online and offline operations. The self-governance and community participation seen in Caixiang Market reconfigure contemporary public relations and resist the relational alienation of an atomized society.

All kinds of interpersonal dynamics — competition and cooperation, trust and wariness — are interwoven here. Trust, as a core mechanism, exhibits structural differences across different product categories, ultimately weaving a stable social network. In an atomised modern society, the wet market provides a natural setting for interaction between strangers. A casual greeting, a bit of bargaining, a sharing of cooking tips — all weave networks of weak ties, nurture trust and empathy, and become powerful support against the alienation of relationships.

Even more importantly, the wet market nurtures a practical wisdom to counter modern anxiety. The fast pace and standardisation of industrial civilisation fragment and instrumentalise life, while the "local ballet" (a metaphor for the market's riot of colors) of the wet market — the artistry of stallholders arranging their goods, the aesthetic of customers selecting produce — composes a unique slow rhythm for the city. Non-standardised foods like handmade tofu and homemade pickled vegetables break the

discipline of industrial production, preserving authentic flavours and craftsmanship. Here, people step away from the rush of work, focus on picking one vegetable or fruit, and feel the concreteness and reality of life. The scent of soil, the variety of dialects, the labourers' toil — all make the generalised notion of "life" vivid and tangible. The wet market is not merely a utilitarian space; it is a spiritual habitat that soothes the soul. Its vibrant, earthy atmosphere —the hustle and bustle of everyday life of daily life — connects heaven and earth, embraces all things, and becomes a "relational space" that stands against the anxieties of modernity.

III. Exposing the Pitfalls of Alienating "Relational Space" in Urbanisation

As a place that carries multiple values, the wet market is now facing an unprecedented survival crisis. This is not a simple iteration of business models, but a systematic deconstruction of the wet market as a "relational space" driven by the combined forces of capital logic, power discourse, and modern thinking.

External pressure comes from capital monopolisation and the squeezing of market space. In 2023, China's fresh food e-commerce market reached 642.7 billion yuan. Platforms such as Meituan Maicai and Dingdong Maicai,both are Chinese apps for purchasing groceries backed by capital, quickly captured market share with low-price strategies and convenient delivery. The pandemic accelerated this shift, making even elderly people getting used to online grocery shopping. On the surface this appears to be "consumption upgrading," but in reality it is the penetration of capital logic into daily life: when grocery shopping is reduced from the experience of “strolling in the market”to the act of “clicking on app”, the social and experiential value of the wet market is eroded. Capital's pursuit of transactional efficiency and profit maximisation turns food into mere commodities and buying-selling into pure monetary exchange, ignoring

the social bonds and cultural genes they carry. Ultimately, consumers gradually lose their tangible connection to food, to others, and to nature.

Internal dilemmas, on the other hand, stem from a power discourse that negates and marginalises public space. Many traditional wet markets have ageing facilities and poor sanitation, but what is more deserving of criticism is the power bias embedded in urban governance: they are stigmatised as "unsanitary" and "backward," turning them into what Foucault would call "problematised sites." In urban renewal, wet markets are treated as a "low-end format," pushed from central locations to the periphery. The crude "one-size-fits-all" approach to regulation ignores the survival logic of vendors and the market ecosystem. Behind this power discourse is modernity's obsessive pursuit of "order" and "standardisation," which sculpts cities into cold, functional spaces. The warmth and fluidity of wet markets are seen as threats to order — a fundamental negation of the multi-valued nature of public relational space.

An even deeper crisis is the rupture of the "people — food — place" connection caused by modern modes of production. Industrial standardisation has stripped greenhouse vegetables of seasonal flavours, and frozen foods mask the texture of fresh ingredients. Under the dominance of intensive agriculture, Greenhouse growing and factory farming have come to dominate; smallholders earn meagre profits; high-quality local seed varieties are phased out; biodiversity shrinks. Standardised production robs food of regional character and seasonal taste — we eat more but taste less. More seriously, standardised supply chains cut the direct link between people and the land, people and producers. We no longer know where our ingredients come from or who grew them. Cold packaging and labels replace the vivid memory of “touching a tomato, smelling a cucumber”. The once-"relational space" of the wet market is being drained into a mere transactional interface. When

"sustainability" is understood only as supply-chain stability, then "consumption upgrading" is nothing but an illusion that masks deeper crises.

IV. The Wet Market's Role in a Resilient Future Food Supply

With intensifying climate change and frequent global risks, Dr. Zhong Shuru's research makes it clear: the wet market is by no means a symbol of backwardness; rather, it is an essential foundation for rebuilding food resilience.

Under China's configuration of a "big country with many small farmers," about 203 million smallholders account for more than 98% of all agricultural households, supplying most of the country's food. For these dispersed small producers, standardised supermarket channels have high entry barriers and high costs. The wet market, with its non-standardised and highly flexible character, perfectly matches their diverse and scattered output with the needs of urban consumers. Vertically, it covers the entire chain — production, procurement, wholesale, retail. Horizontally, it accommodates participants of different scales, types, and social strata, forming a dynamic, monopoly-free, and fully competitive ecosystem. Upward, it supports the livelihoods of small producers, preserving the diversity and sustainability of agricultural production. Downward, it provides fresh, varied ingredients that fill the gaps left by standardised supply chains. This "small-is-beautiful" ecology is more resilient than large-scale supply chains. When extreme weather disrupts long-distance transport, locally-rooted wet markets can still rely on nearby farmers to guarantee basic food security.

The "localised" production-consumption model and the diversity-oriented philosophy embedded in wet markets resonate with internationally

popular practices such as "community garden movements" and "edible landscapes." This is a cultural practice that uses spatial production as a link for urban-rural mutual nourishment, rebuilding the ethical relationship between humans and nature and the ties between city and countryside. Localised consumption reduces the carbon footprint of food transport; diversified cultivation preserves biodiversity; direct producer-consumer interactions enhance the resilience of the food system. At the wet market we can find locally grown seasonal vegetables; through stallholders we can learn about the growth cycles of ingredients. This "visible point of origin" connection is precisely the foundation for a resilient food future.

Dr. Zhong Shuru's research inspires us: to revitalise wet markets and build resilient food relationships for the future is to rediscover the modern value of traditional spaces — combining localness, diversity, and modern ecological thinking to create a more resilient, sustainable, and humane food system.

Summary

To sum up, the book draws on rich domestic and international literature, in-depth insider case studies, raw data, and anthropological narratives to profoundly show that protecting wet markets is essentially about preserving a way of life that resists alienation and returns to authenticity. It is a critique of modernity's defects and a plea for the warmth of human relationships.

We must question the logic of modern development. As urbanisation and digitalisation surge forward, have we lost the essence of life and the warmth of humanity in the name of efficiency and convenience? When the "nearby" is neglected, "freshness" becomes scarce, and "relationships" are reduced to data algorithms, individual anxiety, social

estrangement, and ecological imbalance follow. The wet market provides a legitimate path back.

The survival of wet markets does not require us to wait, but it does require coordinated action from policy and individuals. At the policy level, urban planning should set aside space for wet markets, introduce support measures for street vendors and local farmers, and abandon one-size-fits-all management. At the individual level, we need to rediscover the value of wet markets: slow down, walk into them, support local producers, and actively cultivate neighbourly relations and community interaction through the act of browsing and buying.

"As a microcosm of a place, the wet market allows you to see the whole of Chinese life." (Peter Shu) Protecting wet markets is about keeping the "nearby" from disappearing and making relationships — among people, and between people and nature — even closer. Especially under the twin challenges of climate change and modern alienation, revaluing the multiple values of wet markets is essentially a critique and reflection on the modern development model.

Since 2019, I have been researching Self-Food Provisioning（SFP） from the perspective of the humanities and natural philosophy. On this basis, I was fortunate to be among the first readers of this work, and I have benefited greatly. I am truly grateful to Dr. Zhong Shuru for her decade-long scholarly dedication and academic rigour.

The only shortcoming, in my view, is that the book's philosophical reflection on the sustainable development of wet markets is somewhat underdeveloped in its structure, which weakens the intellectual tension of the final chapter. A few areas could be expanded: first, the generational differences in "customers' preference for browsing" deserve deeper exploration — older people rely more on the social and everyday functions

of wet markets, while younger people place greater weight on "locality" and "experience." Might this lead to functional differentiation of wet markets? How should future spatial design and services adapt to diverse needs? Secondly, the book focuses on the one-way flow of local food into cities along short supply chains, but does not address the reverse interaction: does urban demand for local food support the livelihoods of small rural producers? Can wet markets play a larger role in urban-rural linkages? How could such a mechanism of mutual empowerment be documented with data and insiders' vivid narratives? Lastly, the presence interaction between wet markets and animals and plants — and how this might further elevate a consumption value of all things as one — also awaits deeper exploration. In addition, the term wet market itself has limitations and is not entirely appropriate; I would advise against using it.

These are only my humble opinions, offered for Dr. Zhong Shuru's consideration.

Note:

- Data in the text are from the manuscript.
- Special thanks to Ms. Wang Xiaohui for providing the English version.