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GASTRONOMY TOURISM DRIVERS OF THE ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS (AFN) - CASE STUDIES FROM CHINA AND HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to present the preliminary results of a joint research on surveying the role and prospects of alternative food networks (AFNs) in rethinking and revitalizing rural development strategies in China and Hungary. Based on reviewing the most recent international literature the main concepts of short food supply chains (SFSCs), AFNs, and gastronomy tourism are introduced. The paper describes shortly the distribution of economic sectors, labour forces and the role and tendencies of agricultural and rural development from both countries which followed by the demonstration of their AFN cases. The China's case is based on JIFA high-tech agricultural tourist site showcases the modern ecological agriculture as an immersive educational opportunity as well. It also provides unique gastronomic experience for tourists based on utilizing diversified locally produced culinary ingredients. The Hungary's case is based on a special gastronomy tourism attraction of an old fish soup brewing cult and tradition in South-Danube region of Hungary and cross-border as well. The paper reflects the unique potential of the region for eco- and gastro-tourism based the joint interests of the target groups. The paper draws conclusions and lesson on the major research findings and makes recommendations for future research.

Key words: alternative food networks (AFNs), gastronomy tourism, eco-tourism, case study methodology, China and Hungary

Introduction

Nowadays academic and policy spheres have paid more and more attention to the alternative ways of food production and consumption and role and prospects of gastronomy tourism in sustainable rural development. Localized, community-based food practices have attracted increasing attention among mounting concerns about the social and environmental effects of conventional food systems. The literature has conceptualized these trends as short food supply chains (SFSCs) and alternative food networks (AFNs), both of which provide creative means to link consumers and producers, boost local economies, and protect cultural food legacy.

By means of a comparative study of two distinctive case examples—the JIFA Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park in China and the fish soup brewing tradition in Hungary's South-Danube region—this paper attempts to investigate how AFNs and SFSCs might be drivers of rural revitalization and gastronomy tourism. These examples were chosen not only for their unique geographic and cultural settings but also for their common focus on sustainable food systems, community involvement, and tourism-driven local development. The main objectives of this initial study are:

- To identify the socio-political and financial aspects connecting AFNs with rural tourism growth.
- To analyse the processes by which food-related customs and innovations might be assets for community-based tourism.
- To investigate how various policy settings and historical paths affect the evolution and success of localized food systems in China and Hungary.

By suggesting an integrated framework combining the ideas of AFNs, SFSCs, and gastronomy tourism, this work ultimately aims to add to the continuous academic debate. It also provides suggestions for next studies and doable plans to assist food-based rural development projects across different national environments.

1. Basic concepts, literature review

The definition of local food and food systems has undergone significant changes in the history and in the scientific literature as well. In Japan local food consumption has long tradition. The Buddhist concept of ‘Shindo Huni’ was widespread in the early fourteenth century in Japan. This means that the body’s present condition is a result of its environment. According to the philosophy of ‘Shokuyoukai’, the organization established in 1907, became also a Buddhist teaching the local or regional food is good for the body and imported food has adverse effect. The further developed concept of ‘Shindo Huji’ encourages the consumption of seasonal local food (Tefler and Hashimoto 2013). In Japan, where traditions are taken into account to a greater extent, even today this age-old Buddhist philosophy is still well-known and has followers. The definition of the local food chains or local food systems (LFS) below is based on a theoretical and field research implemented in Japan (Vörös and Gemma 2011: 228.):

- A unique micro-agro-social- and ecosystem characterized by special natural endowments, soil micro-organism, climatic conditions, crop varieties, livestock-breeds as well as human, technical, resources and infrastructure;
- Intensive communications between food producers and consumers living in a certain region in order to produce and supply healthy, fresh, local agricultural and food products according to diversified consumer needs;
- The basic features and characteristics of food (e.g. special raw materials, dishes, tastes, food traditions and food culture) might always be closely tied to particular regions creating and maintaining the identity of these regions.

It has become necessary to distinguish the conventional ways and approach of food production from the alternatives. The conventional food system has been determined as highly mechanized, industrialized or large-scale agriculture with an increased use of monocultures, fertilizers and pesticides, also it encompasses long food supply chains with several nods and food miles. (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Michel-Villarreal 2022, Gori and Castellini 2023 etc.). In respect of consumers’ demand and environment protection there are opportunities to find alternative ways to improve conditions of food supply chains. The main characteristics of conventional food system and their comparison with alternatives can be followed in Table 1.

Table 1 Types and characteristics of food systems

Conventional	Alternative
Manufactured or processed	Natural or fresh
Mass (large scale) production	Craft or artisanal (small-scale) production
Rationalized	Traditional
Standardised	Different and diversified
Intensive	Extensive
Long food supply chains	Short food supply chains
Supermarkets, hypermarkets	Local farmer markets, local food shops
Fast food	Slow food
Conventional catering	Farm-to-table (FTT) catering
Monoculture	Biodiversity

Source: B.Ilbery – D. Maye, 2005 revised and supplemented Vörös and Gemma 2011, Vörös 2022

In conventional food system food products are purchased in big retail shops and the focus is on efficiency and rationalization, where standardized products ensure consistency in global markets. Intensive farming methods are widely used, often relying on monocultures, which can lead to biodiversity loss. In long supply chains food travels vast distances before reaching consumers. Supermarkets and hypermarkets dominate as the main distribution channels, offering fast food options prioritizing convenience over quality or sustainability.
In contrast, alternative food system**s** take a more localized and sustainable approach. Foods in these systems are typically natural or fresh, with processing, and produced on a smaller, more artisanal scale. These systems celebrate traditional food production methods and emphasize diversity, offering various unique products. Instead of relying on intensive farming, they promote extensive, sustainable practices that align with environmental health. Short food supply chains are a key feature of alternative food systems, as they prioritize sourcing and consuming food locally. Distribution occurs through farmers' markets and local shops, fostering a stronger connection between producers and consumers. Slow food is a global movement that promotes traditional food culture and sustainable practices in food production and consumption. This highlights carefully prepared meals made with locally sourced and sustainable ingredients. Finally, alternative systems support biodiversity by encouraging varied farming practices that benefit ecosystems.

The term of short food supply chains (SFSCs) refers to a direct and shortened food distribution system from producer to consumer which emphasises local production and distribution and aims to reduce the number of intermediaries involved in the supply chain. The term was defined in the EU regulation as "a short supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors, and consumers (EC 2013). The SFSCs form an integral part of LFS which prioritize sourcing and consuming food locally. SFSCs represent key feature of alternative food systems where distribution occurs through such alternative channels e.g. farmers' markets and local shops etc. fostering a stronger connection between producers and consumers. To categorize the farmer and consumer relationships three types of SFSC can be distinguished (Ilbery and Maye, 2005):

- Face-to-face, where consumers buy a product direct from the producer/processor on a face-to-face basis.
- Spatially proximate, where products are sold through local outlets in the area and consumers are immediately aware of its local nature.
- Spatially extended, where products are sold to consumers who are located outside the local area and who may have no or little knowledge of that area. Here, the key is to use product labelling and imagery to transfer information about the production process and the area to the consumer.

In the current international literature Michel-Villarreal 2022 reviewed the major roles of SFSCs in sustainable development. In relation to the three main dimensions of sustainability the sustainability practices of SFSCs are summarized in Table 2.
Regarding economic sustainability practices SFSCs can – among others - contribute to profitability, local employment and reduced economic uncertainties. Social sustainability practices are deeply rooted in trust, solidarity and shared values between producers and consumers, which result from the closer proximity between supply chain actors. Regarding environmental sustainability practices SFSCs can have a positive impact on the reduction of food mile. The growing interest in alternative systems reflects rising concerns about food production and consumption's environmental, social, and nutritional impacts.

Table 2 Economic, social, and environmental sustainability of SFSCs

Sustainability dimension	Practices
Economic	Profitability; Local employment; Reduced economic uncertainties; Rural development; Local economic regeneration
Social	Trust; Solidarity; Shared values; Consumer empowerment; Fairness; Promotion of healthy diet; Social inclusion
Environmental	Reduction of food miles; Reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; Reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; Reduction in energy use; Reduction in food waste

Source: Michel-Villarreal 2022 pp. 3-4

The term of alternative food networks (AFNs) emerged in the 1990s in order to describe networks of production, distribution and consumption of food which can be considered as alternatives to dominant or conventional food systems characterized by attributes of local production and short supply chains which integrate dimensions of spatial and social proximity. A summarised definition considers AFNs an emerging model distinct from conventional food systems, characterized by local production and short supply chains that foster direct connections between producers and consumers. Common examples of AFNs include among others direct farm retail, farmers' markets, urban agriculture, farm to table catering, the slow food movement, community supported agriculture, fair trade and specialized forms of organic agriculture etc.

AFNs address ecological and social challenges in traditional agriculture by emphasizing sustainability, fairness, and community engagement. This model reduces carbon emissions, supports eco-friendly farming practices, ensures food freshness and quality through shorter distribution, and provides fair income opportunities for local farmers. Despite challenges such as scaling impact and avoiding commercialization, AFNs offer a pathway to a greener, more equitable food system, calling for collaborative efforts from consumers, policymakers, and researchers while preserving cultural and nutritional traditions.

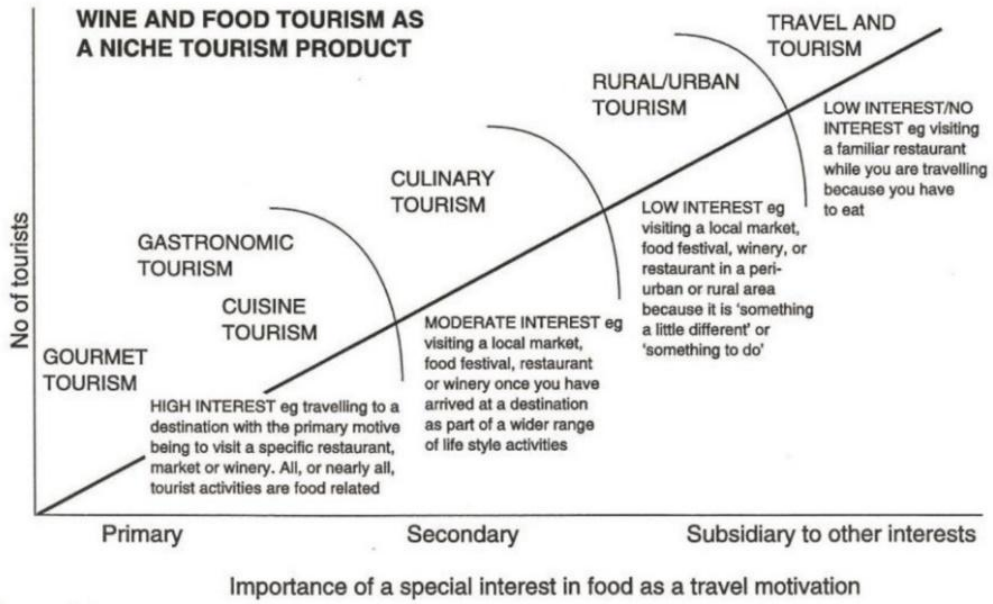
Last but not least alternative systems support biodiversity by encouraging varied farming practices that benefit ecosystems. AFNs seek to diversify and transform modern food provisioning by connecting ethical producers and consumers in more local, direct ways. They build on an ethics of environmental sustainability, social justice, and animal welfare. In summary AFNs are representing a form of local food system (LFS) encompassing short food supply chains (SFSCs) have emerged as a response to the crisis in conventional agribusiness which prioritize efficiency, scale, and global reach, while alternative food systems focus on sustainability, locality. (Ilbery and Maye, 2005, Edwards 2016, Michel-Villarreal 2022, Gori and Castellini 2023 Michel-Villarreal et al 2025).

Intermediaries in SFSCs fulfil an important place in food systems with creating sustainability in supply chains by better connecting existing supply and demand, even when producers and consumers are isolated and fragmented, as well as creating supply and demand in new markets (Renkema and Hilletofth 2022a). Actors involved in the creation of SFSCs have several challenges to overcome to ensure the economic sustainability of the value chain (i.e. regulations, competences within the value chain and access to financing). Collaborations by using intermediaries can lead to intensification of the value chain through different collaboration schemes and increase the access to financing. By working with intermediaries, producers can enable market devices such as contracts, financial transactions and on-line functions necessary to make their supply chain function.

A research study (Popp et al 2019), investigating the creation of SFSCs from socio-economic point of view in Europe, concluded that the globalized food trade networks can be characterized by a high level of vulnerability, a lack of transparency implying high level of environmental burden. This is why the development of SFSCs has attracted considerable attention in the last few decades in Europe and overseas. The study concludes that there is an urgent need for improving the current regulatory system of SFSCs in three main areas: (1) coordinated support by creating and implementing economic policy measures in order to defend the interests of small and medium-sized local producers, (2) support for the upgrade of food safety systems in SFSCs because local food producers do not have the necessary financial resources to establish internationally recognized food safety certification systems (3). As well as education and encouragement of local producers in the wide-ranging application of the latest methods of info-communication technologies. The study (Popp et al 2019) recommended that national governments should promote computer-literacy and different methods of internet-based marketing activities among agricultural and food producers. In this way, the present of long chains can be bypassed.

From the point of view of gastronomy and gastronomy tourism the regional and local characteristics of food (e.g. special raw materials, dishes, tastes, food traditions and food culture) might always be closely tied to particular regions creating and maintaining the identity of these regions. The ‘re-spatialisation’ of food supply chains provides necessary opportunities for food small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) to retain added value in the region, improve employment benefits, strengthen regional imagery and help other local industries e.g. agro-tourism, rural tourism, gastronomy tourism etc. (Ilbery and Maye, 200, Vörös and Gemma 2011, Ciani Vörös and Faggioli 2016). The cuisine of the destination has been more and more important aspect in the quality of the holiday experience for tourists driven by growing trends of a well-being lifestyle. Gastronomy tourism (GT) driven by travel motivations means an emerging phenomenon in the cultural tourism that is being developed as a new tourism product.

Figure 1 Gastronomy tourism as niche and special interest tourism



Source: Hall and Mitchell 2006 in „Gastronomy, food and wine tourism" p. 139, original source Hall and Sharples 2003

The horizontal axis in Figure 1 shows the importance of food and gastronomy as a travel motivation, ranging from a primary focus on the left to a minor interest on the right. The vertical axis measures the number of tourists engaged in each type of gastronomy-related travel. Moving from highly niche interests like gourmet tourism to broader tourism activities like rural/urban tourism, the number of tourists increases, but the relevance of food and gastronomy among travel experience decreases. This spectrum highlights that gastronomy tourism serves as a niche or a mainstream for travellers, adaption their diverse interests and motivations.

Farm to table (FTT) (or farm to fork in some cases farm to school) means a social movement which promotes serving local food at public or school catering service or restaurants preferably through direct acquisition from the producer which might be a farm, winery, brewery, fishery, or other type of food producer. In FTT food is produced and prepared as near as possible to the table which means a safety and traceability network that prevents unsafe food. FTT belongs to short food supply chain (SFSC) models as it covers localized food production and consumption or includes nearby networks without as little long distanced production elements as possible (Korthals 2014). The FTT movement hinges on the notion that the various components of a food system (or a restaurant) should exist in the closest proximity to each other as possible. The goal is to develop relationships between the various stakeholders in an organized food system such as farmers, processors, retailers, restaurateurs and consumers. (Lightspeed, 2022). FTT connection also produces employment, enhances rural liveability and brings people in contact with each other and with rural territories or with the soil. People who adhere to this system are often called 'locavores'. Therefore, FTT is proud on its economic meaning for local people (Korthals 2014).

The most advanced form of FTT comprises an integrated catering business that produces the bulk of its kitchen ingredients directly on its own farm. It is a specific restaurant established and operated inside of farms producing and growing almost all the culinary ingredients for their cuisine. They can provide special authentic local gastronomy products for tourist visitors. Additionally, proximity reduces the environmental impact of transporting ingredients across states or countries (Lightspeed, 2022).

In conclusion, gastronomy tourism is more than just eating local food. it is about connecting with a destination's culture, economy, and traditions. There are three main categories of GT (Hall and Sharples 2003):

(1) Gourmet/Cuisine tourism: the primary motive is visiting a specific restaurant, local market etc. (high interest).
(2) Culinary tourism: visiting a gastronomy destination as a part a wider range of lifestyle activities (moderate interest).
(3) Rural gastronomy tourism: having a visit in a gastronomy destination as a part of a wider rural tourism program (low interest).

From another aspect GT can be determined as a strategic cross-sectoral intersection among agriculture, culture and tourism infrastructure. Agriculture provides special, typical, quality or origin food and terroir-origin wine, many of them are special culinary ingredients which are utilized in local gastronomy to provide authentic hospitality service for tourists. Culture comprises history, food production and processing traditions which guarantee and add history and authenticity to the gastronomy tourism services. Tourism resources ensure the proper infrastructure, supplementary services and management to offer opportunities and activities to be marketed as well as combine and aggregate the three components and attractions into a special, outstanding gastronomy tourism experience. Sustainable gastronomy tourism does not mean conservation the place and time, but rather that inhabitants suppliers and tourists as well can coexist with the heritage of gastronomy (Vörös and Gacnik 2023).

2. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative comparative case study approach to investigate how two different national settings—China and Hungary—alternative food networks (AFNs) and short food supply chains (SFSCs) support rural development and gastronomy tourism. Combining case study analysis, document review, and comparative thematic interpretation, the methodological framework investigates the social, economic, and cultural aspects of every case.

Two chosen cases—the fish soup making custom in the South-Danube region of Hungary and the JIFA Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park in Qinhuangdao, China—form the basis of the study. These examples were selected because of their great connection to local gastronomy tourism and rural revitalization as well as their relevance to AFN and SFSC concepts.

From in-depth textual and empirical sources—including academic literature, local policy documents, field reports, tourism marketing materials, and official statistical databases from both countries—primary data were derived. Particularly the theoretical grounding came from recent studies on rural development and food networks (e.g., Liu et al., 2020; Gori and Castellini, 2023; Michel-Villarreal, 2022). To better grasp institutional frameworks and policy environments, government publications, FAO databases, and documentation on EU rural development programs were also examined.

Secondary data sources included:
For China: Journal articles on food safety and e-commerce-based food distribution; tourism reports and promotional materials on Jifa Park; published studies on China's AFNs and urban-rural integration policies.
For Hungary: research on local food systems backed by EU funding programs, ethnographic documentation on the Baja fish soup tradition, rural development reports, Hungarian Central Statistical Office data, and so forth.
Seeking to find both convergences and divergences between the two case studies, the approach adopts the ideas of comparative analysis. Particularly focused on local stakeholder roles (farmers, civil organizations, consumers, visitors), institutional support, cultural embeddedness of food traditions, and the sustainability component of food networks was the dimension of this.
To ensure academic rigor, triangulation was employed through cross-checking multiple data sources and situating findings within broader academic discourse. All of the chosen resources were cross-checked and placed within the larger scholarly debate on sustainable food systems, rural tourism, and community-based development to guarantee academic rigor. The last comparison seeks not only to highlight best practices but also to propose a conceptual bridge inspiring future transnational cooperation in gastronomy tourism and food network innovation.

3. Main characteristics of agriculture and food economy, rural development problems, tendencies and prospects in China and Hungary

3.1. China

In China, agriculture is one of the most significant sectors of the socio-economy since it offers jobs to approximately 22.8% of the population while contributing roughly 7.1% of the national GDP as depicted (see Figure 2 and 3)

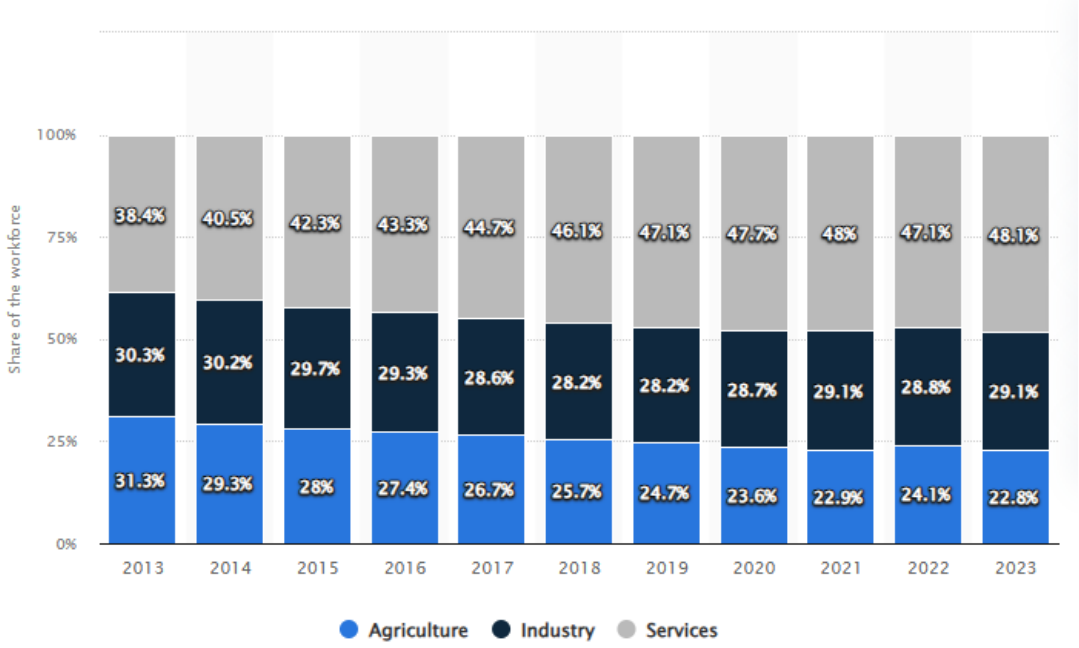
To achieve the above contributions, as highlighted by Liu et al. (2018) and Wang et al. (2016), the industry has evolved drastically in the last few decades by realizing increased government investment and policy changes, as evidenced in Figure 4.

At the initial stage, it was all about providing people with food and clothing by implementing the rural household contract responsibility system and a single framework in agriculture. From 2005, a multi-functional mechanism began to form, aiming at poverty-targeted alleviation and the “new urbanization,” which integrated urban-rural partition to improve the quality of rural life (Liu et al., 2020).
The rural revitalization strategy took precedence by 2017, which called for industrial upgrades, infrastructure enhancement, and the contemporary improvement of the rural region. Post-2020, focus shifted towards developing a balanced urban-rural structure with strong frameworks that enhance sustainable agriculture, healthy ecosystems and socio-equality (Liu et al., 2020). When looking to the future, 2035 and 2050, the vision is to reach a level of agricultural modernization and rural development to establish an integral urban-rural development model. This progressive transformation shows the new China for modernization of agriculture, nominal eradication of rural-urban divide, and guaranteeing sustainable prosperity.

China has large-scale agriculture for domestic demand and export, small-scale farming for local usage, and organic farming (Chen, 2015). The challenges associated with China’s agricultural sector include small and fragmented plots of land, environmental degradation, and inadequate human capital, especially in rural areas, caused by increased urbanization. These

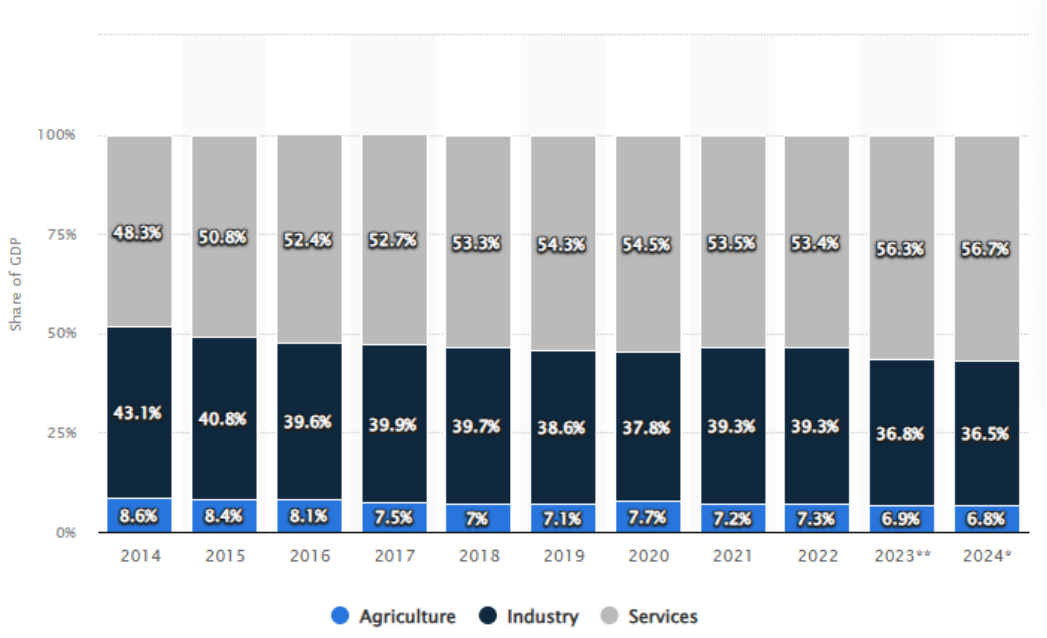
growing factors, coupled with modern industrialization and urbanization, have raised environmental concerns, soil erosion, water pollution and species loss (Cole and McCoskey, 2018; Yousaf et al., 2024).

Figure 2 Distribution of the workforce across economic sectors in China from 2013 to 2023



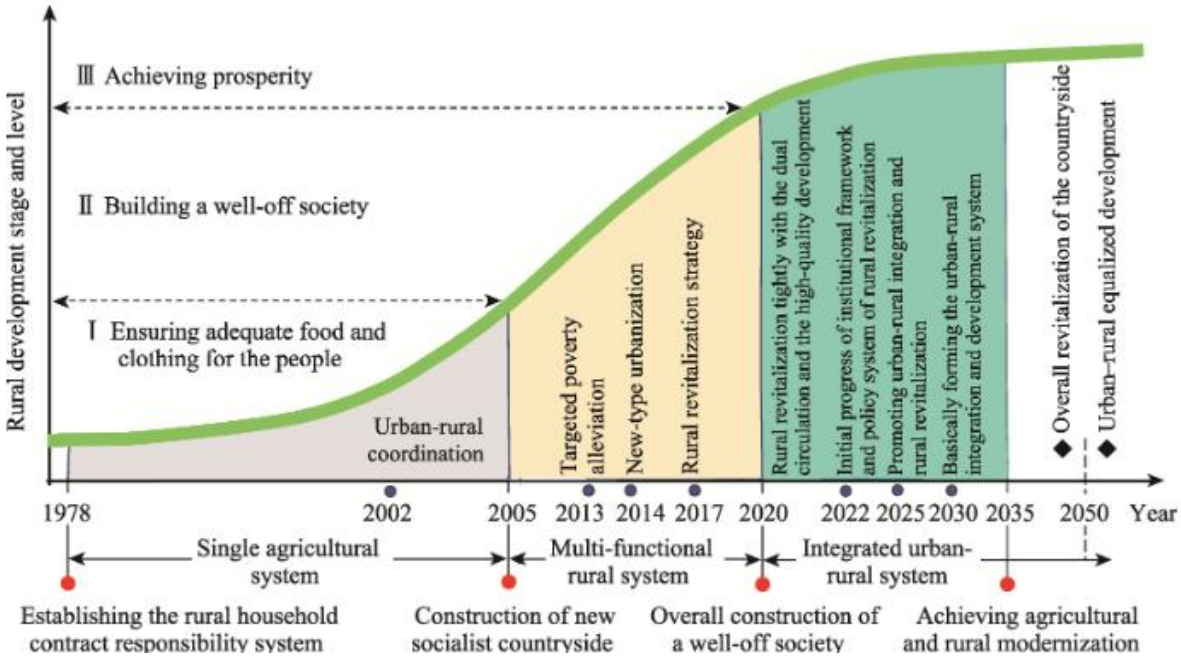
Source: World Bank © Statista.

Figure 3 Distribution of the gross domestic product (GDP) across economic sectors in China from 2013 to 2023



Source: World Bank © Statista.

Figure 4 Rural development stages in the past and projection in China



Source: Liu, Yansui, Zang, Yuzhu and Yang, Yuanyuan. (2020). China's rural revitalization and development: Theory, technology and management

China's agricultural sector is characterized by a mix of smallholder farms and large-scale industrial agriculture, producing a wide variety of crops, including rice, wheat, corn, and vegetables, as well as livestock and aquaculture products. This dual structure allows for high-volume production for domestic consumption and export, and smaller-scale farming aimed at local markets and sustainable practices (Giller et al., 2021). Smallholder farms are always disadvantaged in terms of markets, credit, and technologies. However, there are managerial opportunities for improvements by adopting sound agricultural practices that are ecologically sound, harnessing technology, and forging local markets (Cohen and Ilieva, 2015; Loconto and Vicovaro, 2016). They also argue that small farmers who produce food crops can directly market them through digital technologies such as e-commerce.

The Chinese government has implemented many policies to improve agriculture and rural areas of the country. Policies like the "No. 1 Central Document" focus on developing the new countryside, the modernization of agriculture, and environmental protection (Weiduo et al., 2021). Education and healthcare improvements have been made, especially in rural areas, since rural life quality is an essential factor of development (Strasser et al., 2016). China's agriculture modernization policy, similarly to the consolidation of land holdings in Brasilia, is focusing on centralization of farmland and rural industrial development (Gori and Castellini, 2023; Weiduo et al., 2021).

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) are gaining popularity in China, contributing to the contemporary agriculture system (Gori and Castellini, 2023). The focus of these networks is to make the supply chain shorter, to make it more transparent and to improve the relationship between producers and consumers. Such networks help consumers get quality food that is 'green', 'clean' and locally grown to improve health and the environment. Since AFNs and SFSCs reduce the chain between the supply point and the consumption point and make the process clear, producers and consumers are made to be in contact (Renkema and Hilletofth, 2022).

Initiatives like farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) offer fresh foods grown in local or nearby areas and contribute to small scale farming (Chen et al., 2022a; Woods et al., 2017).

This is well illustrated in case of Alibaba's "Village Taobao" project which matches farmers with consumers, improving the availability of local food and supporting sustainable agriculture practices (Nayak and Hartwell, 2023). This is advantage because it allows the producers, who are mostly farmers in the rural areas, to sell their products directly to the consumers in the urban areas without the middlemen.

Alibaba's "Village Taobao" initiative serves as an example of how digital platforms can empower rural communities by facilitating direct connections between producers and consumers. This effectively supports the development of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) and Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) (Nayak and Hartwell, 2023). Shandong Province's Village D serves as an example. Agriculture and traditional crafts, such as handmade Yangge dance costumes, were the village's main sources of income prior to 2009. When a returning migrant worker opened a Taobao store and encouraged others to do the same, it started to change. Local start-ups in the fields of logistics, e-commerce, and photography gradually surfaced (Wang et al., 2023).
By 2013, the village was formally recognized as a Taobao Village, with over 90% of households running online stores. This change was largely caused by government assistance, such as funding for digital infrastructure and training for entrepreneurs (Wang et al., 2020). The program produced new non-agricultural job opportunities and greatly raised household income.
Taobao Villages are prime examples of how localized e-commerce can help AFNs by reducing supply chains, enhancing traceability, and building consumer and producer trust. By encouraging sustainable development and diversifying rural economies, they also aid in rural revitalization (Renkema and Hilletofth, 2022; Chen et al., 2022a).

China continues to rely heavily on its farming system and food culture concerning its food production and consumption. Modern Chinese consumers' food choices have greatly transformed due to several factors such as urbanization, improved income levels, and alterations in life patterns (Yuan, et al., 2019). Today's consumers are looking for a wider range of better-quality food products and are willing to buy organic and imported foods. However, clients in China are still very sensitive to issues of food safety and increasing environmental consciousness (Peng et al., 2015). These are concerns that the development of AFNs and SFSCs in China seeks to realize, particularly for locally produced safe and sustainable food (Chen et al., 2022b). Organic agriculture has been rapidly welcomed in China; the country now has more than thirty-million-hectare farmland, which is certified for organic farming systems in the year 2020, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023).

Trends in China indicate a growing interest in sustainable and locally produced food. Consumers are becoming more aware of their food choices' environmental and social impacts and are seeking alternatives to conventional food systems (Fanzo et al., 2021). Possible future trends comprise the extension of the AFNs and SFSCs, as well as the application of digital technologies to make the supply chains more efficient and connected, and the formulation of policies for sustainable food systems (Renkema and Hilletofth, 2022b; Pizzarelli, 2021).

Despite the fact even thou the goals of rural development strategies in China are quite similar, their vision, strategies, and results are dissimilar. China's rural development features include massive reserves used in developing infrastructures, training centres, and hospitals, among others (Ma et al., 2022). As part of the strategic plan of the Chinese government concerning rural areas, the major focuses are the modernization of agriculture, the centralization of farmland, and the development of industries in rural areas. Measures like the "No. 1 Central Document" are underlined by the need to increase agriculture's efficiency, improve rural areas' infrastructure, and promote sustainable development (Peng et al., 2023). These policies aim to equalize the urban-rural disparities for better regional integration.

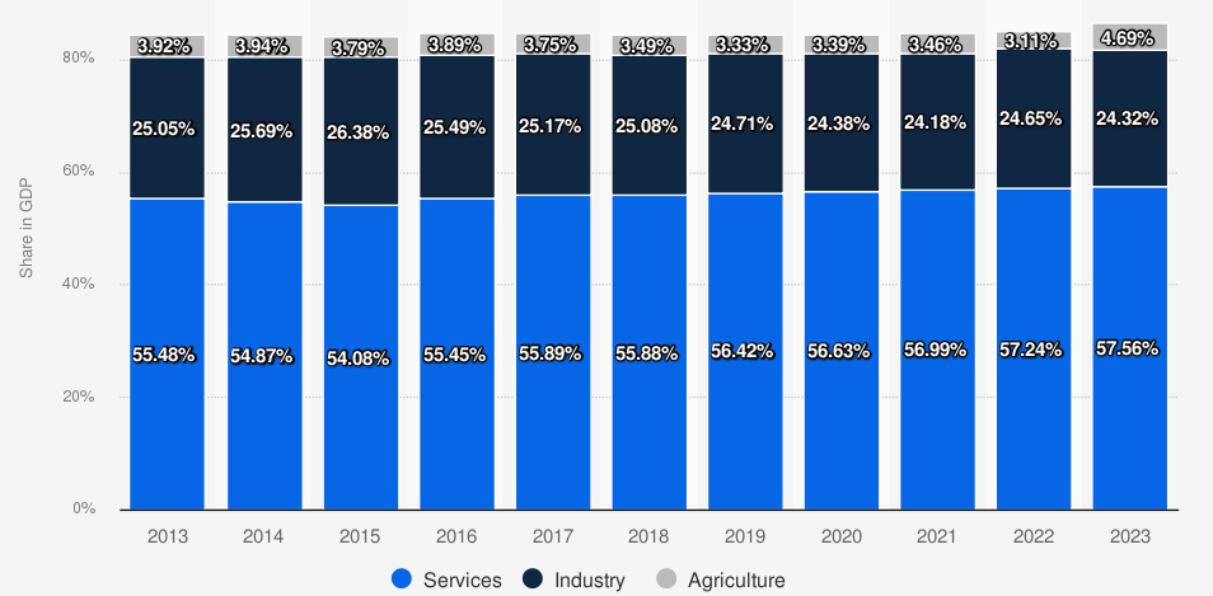
One of the best practices is the Chinese Chengdu Gastronomy City project has helped sell Sichuan food, increasing tourism and the overall economy. The project includes classes on cookery, food-related tours, and visits to the food markets, which help to popularize the local food culture (Chen et al., 2022a). Likewise, Zhejiang Province uses its well-known Longjing (Dragon Well) tea to appeal to plantation tourism and customized tea-drinking rituals (Jiang, 2019; Xu, 2022). Prospects include continuing to invest in sustainable agricultural practices, supporting rural entrepreneurship, and enhancing the integration of AFNs and SFSCs with rural development strategies (Floriš and Schwarcz, 2018; Vittoriet al., 2019).

There is a relevant initiative in China to build a circular economy for food within a larger systematic transformation vision. As Yu (2021) stresses in the Ellen MacArthur Foundation report. China has been actively trying to change its food system by cutting food loss and waste, restoring natural systems, and redesigning value chains to run within ecological limits. Through localized sourcing, composting, and regenerative agriculture, several pilot programs in cities including Shanghai and Suzhou have shown scalable solutions for transforming urban food systems. These approaches not only support the values of alternative food networks (AFNs) and short food supply chains (SFSCs) but also fit with national objectives for environmental protection and food safety.

3.2. Hungary

Hungary is a rural country with 66.3% of its total territory (93,000 km²) classified as rural, 33.1% as intermediate and only 0.6% is considered urban territory. From the 9.59 million total population of the country 46% lives in rural areas. (EC 2024). The agricultural land covers 57% and forestry 21% of the total territory. Compared to the EU average the Hungarian agricultural sector is atypical with very high share of arable farming which occupies 81% from the total agricultural land and the grassland covers 14 % (EC 2024).
In 2022 agriculture's share was relatively low 3.2 % in the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Concerning the tendency in the last decade (2012-2022) the share has been decreasing (Figure 5).

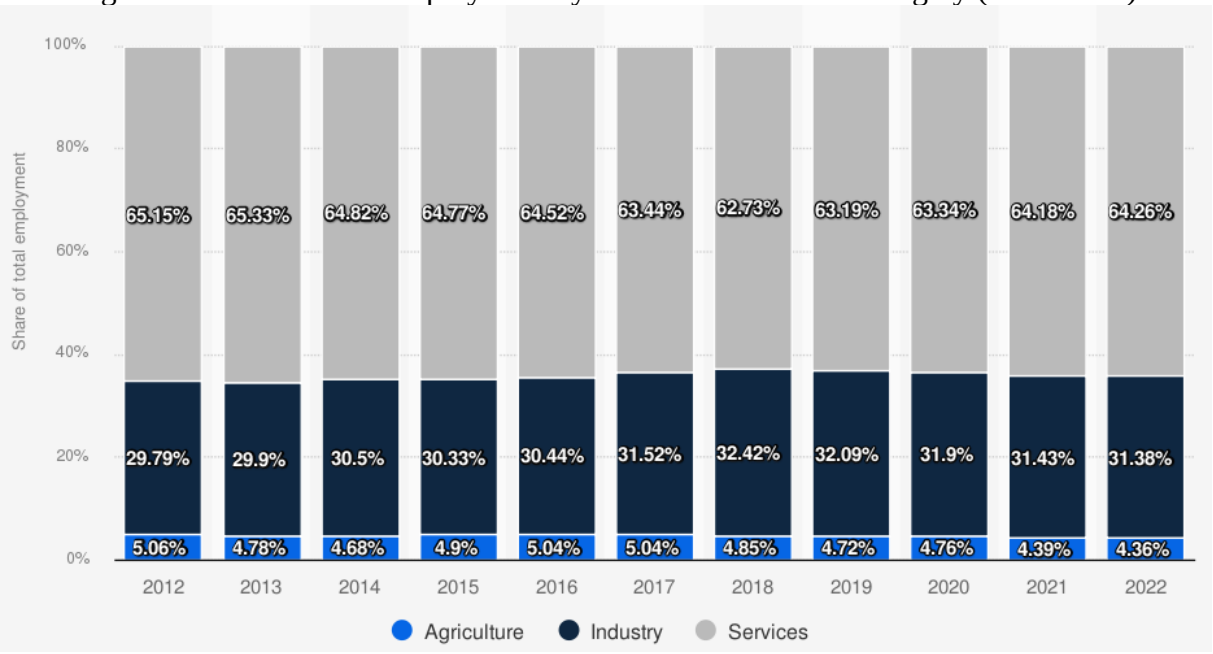
Figure 5 Share of economic sectors in gross domestic products (GDP) in Hungary (2012-2022)



Source: World Bank © Statistic 2024, Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO)

In 2023 agriculture's employment was 4.4% in the country's total labour force which has been also an ever-decreasing tendency during this decade (Figure 6). The share of the sector was slightly higher 5,1% ten years before (2012).

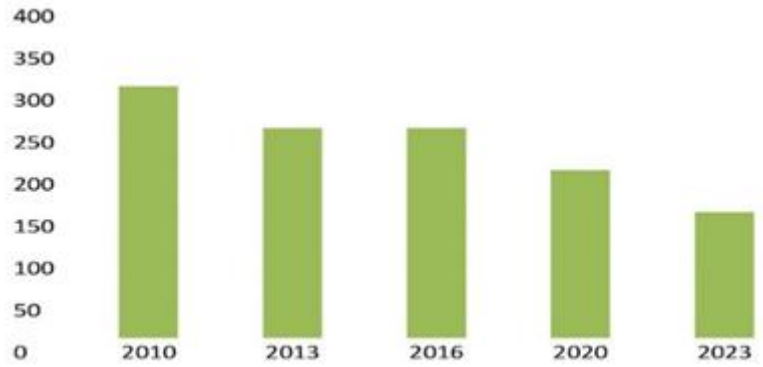
Figure 6 Distribution of employment by economic sectors in Hungary (2012-2022)



Source: World Bank © Statistic 2024, Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO)

The decline of farm operations accelerated over the decade of 2013-2023. The number of farms has been considerably decreased from 342.000 into 196,000 with 101,000 less holdings which is relevant 42.7% decline. Considering the second half of this decade the number of farm operations decreased with 45,000 which is 19% decline (Figure 7).
In last decade a significant concentration of farm sector has been going on in Hungary. The average farm size doubled from 14 ha up to 28 ha. The small farms made up the largest share that left the business. During this period the average number of animals on farm has also decreased. In 2023 the most typical farm operation was the 1-5 ha farm category (33%). From the total farm operation 15% cultivated an area less than 1 ha and 7% was livestock farm which doesn't use land. Around 20% of the total agricultural land owned by the 200-500 ha farm category (USDA-GAIN 2023).

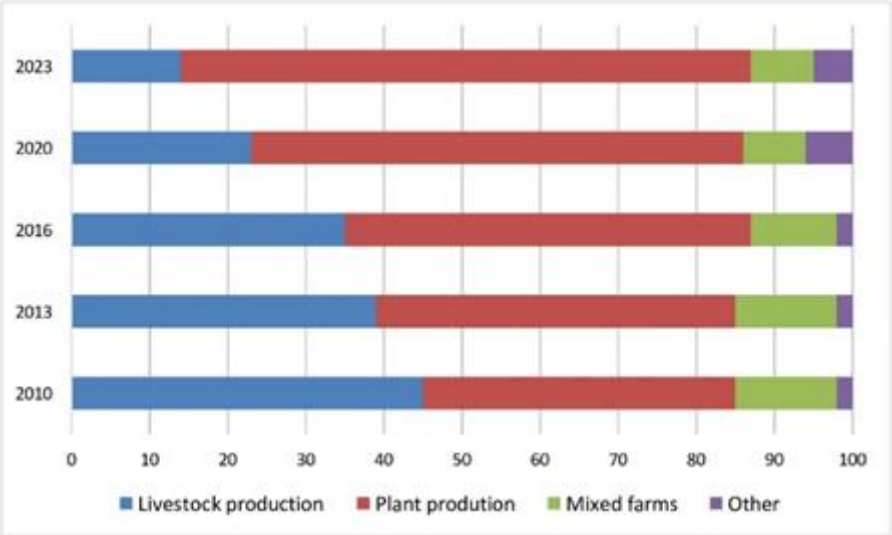
Figure 7 Number of agricultural operations (thousands) in Hungary



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO) USDA-GAIN 2023

During the period of 2010 - 2023 an unfavourable tendency of disproportional change of the ratio of plant production (mainly grain and oilseed) and of livestock production has been going on (Figure 8). The livestock production declined from 45% to 15% while the plant production increased from around 40% up to 70% (Figure 8). According to Farkas et al (2023) between 2010-2020 the proportion of livestock holdings decreased significantly, while the share of mixed holdings fell to 9 %. The loss of animal husbandry is shown by the fact that the proportion of farms engaged in animal husbandry has been continuously decreasing while animal husbandry and crop production separated. A total of 51% farm have agricultural land without animal population while 15% of the farm with animal population don't have agricultural land at all. The significant reduction of field vegetable, fruit and vines production proven to be also an unfavourable tendency.

Figure 8 Changes in distribution of farm operations in Hungary



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO) USDA-GAIN 2023

Because of deterioration or lack of self-sufficiency for supplying the domestic demand of milk, meat vegetable and fruits the country forced to import which might cause problems in the balance of payments and in food safety.

During the first decade of the new century EU policymakers recognised that improving conditions of local food production, supply and consumption and supporting local food movements has become proven as a favourable rural development tool. Therefore, the role of short food supply chains (SFSCs) got a priority in EU's multiannual financial framework and rural development policy. In the 2007-2013 programming period the Leader Local Action Groups could provide help to producers and villages to start or improve local food operations. Limited amount of national funding has been available to develop and open farmers' markets for products coming from special rural areas dominated by isolated farmsteads.

In the next 2014-2020 programming period a number of new measures and co-financing opportunities became available in scope of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD for producers wishing to join the local food systems (Szabó and Juhász 2015, Ciani Vörös and Faggioli 2016). Hungary was among the EU countries taken up the option of including a SFSC thematic sub-programme in the country's Rural Development Programme. Owing to this policy several different forms of SFSCs has started to grow rapidly in Hungary.

The nature and strength of the relationship between producers and consumers varies among different types of SFSCs. The most typical forms of SFSCs existing in the recent Hungarian practice are classified and listed in Table 3 based on the guidelines of Ilbery and Maye (2005) published in their most cited research study in international literature.

Table 3 Types of SFSCs by categories in Hungary

Relationships between farmer and consumer		
Face-to-face	Spatially proximate	Spatially extended
Direct sales on farm	Community Supported Agriculture (SCA)	EU food protection and designation schemes (PDO, PGI,TSG)
Pick your own farm	Local retail shops operated by farmers or farmer's cooperatives	National food brands e.g. Traditions-Flavours-Regions TFR (Hagyományok Ízek Régiók HÍR in Hungarian) programme; National Park Brand
Direct selling on the road	Box scheme programs	National certifications e.g Hungarikum Collection (food products, tourism and hospitality)
House delivery from the farm	Shopping community system or local "basket" community	Other domestic certification e.g. "Quality Food from Hungary"
Direct or local farmer's market	Internet based on-line local food marketing	
Guest tables at the farm	Selling from the farm to local catering/restaurants	
Farm to table (FTT) catering service and restaurant	Local food and/or local gastronomy festivals, food exhibitions	
	Selling local food in tourism park or in dining routes for tourists	

Source: Own design based on the classification of Ilbery, B. and Maye, D. 2005 p.334

Similar tables have been also created and published in the Hungarian scientific literature (Benedek and Balázs 2014, Bakos and Khademi-Vidra 2019). This local food renaissance was driven by both consumer and producer demand and was strengthened by regulatory and support mechanisms (Ciani Vörös and Faggioli 2016, Ciani and Vörös 2020).

The main characteristics and operation of some SFSC, selected from the list of Table 3, are highlighted and explained in following. The purpose of opening direct or local farmer's market is to shorten the distance between the small-scale farmers, the producers, and market visitors, consumers or to make them the accessibility of local product easier. Consumers buying local food in farmers' markets prefer and enjoy direct communication with farmers which is a base of the trust. For legal regulation of establishing and operating farmers' markets the Ministry for Agriculture's Decree of 51/2012. (VI. 8.) entered into force in 2012. This national legislation restricted the distance of the region from where local product can be transported to the market place at maximum 40 km. Budapest the capital is an exception as it's possible to sell local products transported from any rural region of the country. Regarding the distribution of direct farmer's markets, the central region of Hungary (Budapest and County Pest) has got priority. Approximately one fifth of farmers' markets are located within this area owing to the larger solvency demand and consumer's share. Due to the national regulation and growing interest of consumers the number of this type of local food markets almost triplet until 2020 and spread in all over in Hungary. (Ciani Vörös and Faggioli 2016, Kacz 2019, Perényi et al 2024).

In case of community based agriculture (CSA) form of SFSC there is close strong relationship between farmers and customers who undertake to buy 'shares' from the farmers in a contract and pay in advance. In return the product are delivered to them after harvesting which could be arranged in different ways. Usually they agree a drop-off point where products are delivered and received. In this form consumers have a strong role in supporting the CSA producer mainly financially, but they often have a strong, even emotional commitment. In case of box scheme program, the commitment is less between farmer and consumer. Small and large boxes of vegetables can be pre-ordered from the producer on a weekly basis, but it is not necessary to commit to the entire season. In addition to the ordered boxes, individual goods may also be sold at the market if the farm produced a larger than expected quantity. In a more flexible form, the box system may allow customers to make occasional orders without permanent commitment. When they require and order the products the farmers deliver the goods to drop-off points which they previously agreed.

Another SFSC form is the shopping community system or "basket" community which has become more and more widespread in Hungary. The main characteristic of shopping communities is that they are always organized on a voluntary basis, as a joint endeavour by producers, organizers and volunteers, to provide a dedicated space drop-off points for the sale of local produce grown by small-scale producers. These spaces can also perform various other social and community-building functions.

A Hungarian research group (Török et al 2024) investigated the opportunity of certain social enterprises, some of them involved in catering business services and create a special SFSCs group. The study analysed the cases of three most prominent members of the Hungarian para-gastro movement which are based on sourcing inputs via SFSCs as an opportunity (see "Selling from the farm to local catering/restaurants" on Table 3). The study concluded that these very useful and relevant social enterprises must face all the industry's difficulties and their unique circumstances might make their operations even more difficult.
Taking into account the support these enterprises have received in pursuit of their social goals, the opportunities provided by the relationship with SFSCs can help them only if they are also able to find a niche market where solvent demand can accept the specialties of local sourcing gastronomy services (Török et al 2024).

An actual empirical research in Hungary (László et al 2024) found that relatively high level of consumer trust was measured for local food products and producers compared to other stakeholders which can strongly strengthen the assumption for the proximity-trust relationship regarding food. This is a key factor for small-scale food producers only shared values with the local community and earned trust can attract customers.

A research study highlighted that in Hungary most of the small-scale food producers belongs to traditional farmers with multiple generations of agricultural backgrounds decided to continue farming. As demonstrated and discussed earlier in the article the consumer groups that prefers to buy and consume locally sourced farm grown products and the organizational forms of SFSCs or AFNs are widening there are limited number of conventional producers who are able to participate effectively in these community organizations. The main reason is that traditional producers lack the knowledge needed to initiate communication and to be prepared enough to join alternative food networks. (Balogh et al 2021).

Based on statistical analysis and empirical research Farkas and Kovács (2018) called the attention on the evident problems of disparities between rural regions and identified lagging groups of settlements both in terms of local living conditions and in economic development. Hoyk et al (2022) revealed that the Hungarian agribusiness sector is struggling with several sustainability challenges which do not receive adequate attention from policymakers. The critical approach of the controversial practice of rural development proved that the policy and the connected subsidy and support system have not been successful enough in the past decades in Hungary

Farkas and Kovács (2018) have been summarized the complex reasons of the major failures of measures of rural regional development (1) Shortcomings of the policy of the development of rural areas and its overconfidence on endogenous resources emphasized by certain scientific theories (2) the evident disproportion of the distribution of funds for the benefit of agricultural subsidies neglecting rural development characterized in all EU countries (3) weaknesses of domestic support policy practice in which the distribution of financial assets is not sufficiently differentiated for the benefit of rural areas.

The locally produced food and beverage have a significant touristic value as these are vital components of tourists' experience. Gastronomy tourism showcases the country's or region's culture and heritage associated with the typical local quality food and special local cuisine which has obvious effect on the frequency of tourism visitors and encourage their revisiting the destinations. More and more people realize that the sources of their daily food should be as much as possible near their home and many of them show growing interest or prefers catering service based on locally sourced culinary ingredients (Vörös and Gacnik 2023

In Hungary the FTT catering is even less widespread but there is an excellent unique living example 'Pajta' Restaurant located in County 'Vas', Village Őriszentpéter inside of 'Őrség' National Park. Concerning the source of the culinary ingredients the restaurant has some limited own seasoning crop production, besides they can also collect wild crops in the surrounding woods and fields but mainly they are based on purchasing local or regional products in the local market or in close connection with local or regional farmers by applying strict quality control.

After thirteen's year operation in 2024 'Pajta' Restaurant became a One Star Michelin (High Quality Cooking) and the year before the owners achieved the Michelin Welcome and Service Award (Michelin Guide 2023). According to their promotion "the whole complex has a natural feel, from the beautiful meadow to the two-storey, nature-inspired forest lodges 1km down the road. Menus change with the seasons and perfectly reflect the area, championing produce from Őrség local sub-region in historical Hungarian dishes. Fermenting and pickling are a feature, adding a welcome punch to the flavour-packed creations. Neighbouring Austria and Slovenia join Hungary for a tri-country wine pairing experience." (Michelin Guide n.d.).

It can be concluded that FTT catering means a relevant form of gastronomy tourism which contribute in creation of different values in the food supply chain. According to the international internet promotions the type of integrated farm-catering FTT restaurant business are spreading rapidly around the world. In the integrated FTT business enterprise most of the quality raw materials grown in the own eco-farm and directly used in the cuisine which is able to realize more economical and effective business operation by decreasing the cost of logistics, transportation, overhead as well and increasing profit margin.

By implementing eco-farm cultivation methods without chemical use are resulting in an increase in the humus content of the soil which have a favourable positive impact on the rural agricultural environment, promoting the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals SDG (UNWTO-JICA (2023).
This FTT type is an emerging perspective direction in gastronomy tourism which, considering the favourable gastronomic history and traditions. as well as significant unexplored natural environmental capabilities of the country, comprises promising perspective for Hungary in the future, too.
The gradual expansion and spreading of FTT restaurant businesses in Hungary would considerably contribute to reduce the dominance of the currently over-represented "Budapest tourism" to broaden the appeal of rural tourism and rural gastronomy tourism to rediscover and renew existing values. It is a question will there be enough financial source, sufficient business spirit as well as well-trained professional background in Hungary in the future for implementing these development goals.

4. Case studies

4.1. Chinese case study: The JIFA Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park as an ecology- and gastronomy tourism site

Jifa Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park, referred to as Jifa Agricultural Dream Kingdom, is a 4A-rated tourist attraction located in Beidaihe District, Qinhuangdao City, Hebei Province, in the North part of China. Established in 1983, it evolved into a comprehensive high-tech agricultural tourism destination following its upgrade and makeover in 2018 (Tour Beijing, 2025). The park encompasses around 800 acres. The primary characteristic is the integration of advanced agriculture and tourism. It amalgamates observation, amusement, recreation, and popular science teaching while incorporating tourism, vacationing, harvesting, and skiing.
It is China's inaugural high-tech agricultural tourist site designated as a 4A-level scenic area, having received the China Rural Tourist Best Sightseeing Agriculture Award and the distinction of being among Hebei Province's 30 Most Beautiful Sceneries.
The primary attributes of Jifa Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park encompass agricultural plant observation, parent-child recreational activities, and educational camping research. The picturesque region comprises six principal thematic zones: the entrance service area, parent-child fun area, natural relaxation area, agricultural science experience area, theme park area, and green dining area. Furthermore, the picturesque area has incorporated hundreds of innovative tropical and subtropical plants to satisfy tourists' desires for sightseeing and harvesting throughout the year (Qi & Li, 2012b). The picturesque region features advanced fruit and vegetable production facilities, three-dimensional vegetable art museums, non-motorized parks, dynamic recreational areas, wild children's parks, and Baigongfang amenities. Furthermore, the picturesque region features charming pet parks, live vegetable production facilities, and agricultural science museums dedicated to fruits and vegetables, offering extensive agricultural technology exhibitions and interactive experiences for parents and children. The main features of Jifa tourism park are summarized below:

The natural agricultural tourist area

The natural agricultural sightseeing park is distributed north and south of the park. The southern part is mainly a tropical botanical garden combined with folk customs (Amei Customs Pavilion, Li Customs Pavilion, Tropical Customs Pavilion), where you can see all kinds of exotic plants and fruit trees (Tour Beijing, 2025). For example, the Amei Customs Pavilion mainly grows southern fruit trees such as wax apples, egg yolk fruits, bread trees, citrus, and traveller bananas; the Li Customs Pavilion mainly presents the customs of the Hainan Li people and grows coconuts, cocoa trees, iron watermelons, mangoes, etc. The exhibition area not only grows crops with ethnic and regional characteristics, but each crop also has a signboard to make a detailed introduction so that tourists can have a deep impression of the characteristics of each ethnic group through agricultural plants, etc. The venue has unique fruit sales stalls, and the fruit crops grown can be purchased on-site. The temperature in the pavilion is maintained at around 25℃-30℃, and there are heating measures. Heating is provided in the pavilion after winter. In addition to tropical plants, the museum also has relevant information about ethnic minorities such as the Amis and Li and is decorated with Amis percussion instruments, Li totems, shoulder poles, etc. During the peak season or folk festivals, there will be singing and dancing activities, calligraphy and painting, exhibitions, and other performances, bringing tourists a rich cultural experience. The live vegetable factory includes an artificial light plant factory and an efficient agricultural system that enables year-round continuous crop production through precise environmental management within the facility. It employs clever computers and electrical sensor systems to autonomously regulate environmental parameters, including temperature, humidity, light, carbon dioxide levels, and nutrient solutions for plant organisms (Tour Beijing, 2025). The factory not only facilitates the production of southern and seasonal vegetables in the north but also spearheads the formulation and implementation of local standards for green vegetable production in Qinhuangdao City, leading to the attainment of A-level green food certification for 15 common vegetable varieties in the north. The operations of the live vegetable factory encompass seasonal harvesting, fruit, and vegetable gift box production, agricultural growth, as well as planting and maintenance activities. It serves as a significant foundation for research and educational practice.

Tropical Plant Kingdom

The park contains multiple expansive tropical plant technology greenhouses cultivated with diverse tropical flora and commodities. It encompasses a health resort center featuring hotels, restaurants, recreational areas, reading spaces, and entertainment facilities within a tropical agricultural park characterized by an exceptional environment and air quality.

Other venues feature specialized exhibitions of pumpkin agricultural products, unique sales of flowers and plants, sales of small planting pots, and supporting amusement facilities and rest areas within the tropical park. These initiatives encompass diverse sales and marketing strategies, integrating venue cultivation with diverse cultural industries, effectively disseminating knowledge about tropical crops, and enhancing agricultural possibilities (Qi & Li, 2012a). Agricultural crops are valuable for cultivation and enhance tourism, cultural significance, and economic value, hence broadening the functions of agriculture and augmenting local economic revenue.

Outdoor recreational facilities

The park features numerous recreational amenities, primarily located in its central area, including grass skiing, a ski resort, a rainbow slide, a carousel, a Ferris wheel, go-karts, a reclining swing, and so on. Visitors may engage in the entertainment initiatives of the viewing park while appreciating its picturesque landscape (Trip, 2025). A water park is located in the southern section of the park, accessible to guests during the summer season. The park will partition the entertainment area to accommodate several themed entertainment projects, including Pumpkin Town, Car Town, Crab Fishing, and Harvest War.

Cute Pet Paradise

The park contains a zoo, predominantly housing docile animals. Visitors may purchase veggies or feed to nourish the animals in the park. The veggies available in the park originate only from the live vegetable factory located within the ecological park.

Agricultural product sales and market development

Agricultural items in the park, including soilless vegetables, may be sold at the park's market or harvested by tourists. The park has simultaneously launched new sales models, including fruit and vegetable gift boxes and family vegetable boxes, integrated with contemporary e-commerce services for home delivery of fresh produce. This modern agricultural sales approach has significantly augmented local agricultural revenue.

Gastronomy and local cuisine for tourists in JIFA

Gastronomy at JIFA involves more than just food because it represents the interplay between culture, sustainability, education, and tourism. Looking at gastronomy, the park show how it can embrace sustainable practices in AFNs through over attractions invoking visitors' various sensory modes. Gastronomy tourism at JIFA Park encourages tourists to engage in different dining experiences that are inclusive of other senses apart from taste or palates as proffered by the conventional restaurant businesses. Combining a stay in a hotel with work on the plot – harvesting vegetables or engaging in a culinary workshop – provides an opportunity to find a spiritual equivalent to the produced food (Tour Beijing, 2025). These enlightened experiences leave a memorable and lasting impression easily translating into awareness and respect for sustainable agricultural practices.

JIFA offers natural organic products grown in the farm. The live vegetable factory is one of the principles of the park where fresh materials for cooking are grown. The fresh vegetables produced under hydroponic and vertical farming systems are not only served in the restaurants within the park but also used to prepare cooking demonstrations and touring the park's exhibits. Tourists must be educated about the route that food takes from package to their plate by making them understand how much effort is put by farmers to produce vegetables organically.

There is a special approach of JIFA'S gastronomy and its culture. The section of tropical plant kingdom in the park offers tourists some unfamiliar types of fruits and plants including wax apples, breadfruit and traveller bananas. They are sourced from tropical region and included in creative dishes, which adopt Chinese culinary methods but with flavours from around the world. This makes the experience autochthonous and concurrent with other trends in the broader global food culture.

The seasonal events, or festivals, add more variety to the park's choices in regards to food. These events preserve the culture of farming and also the erased culinary representation of the area through food sampling, culinary battles and recitals. For example, during a harvest festival, there could be a show of how food is cultivated, live, freshly cultivated foods are available for tasting, and there are folk dances and songs that depict farming.

These events work hand in hand to associate food with culture and reactivate the bonds of togetherness to bring about a common platform for group pride.

JIFA is also sensitive towards sustainability and environmental concerns. It brings to the table organic food orientation of food services and certified food programs as most of the food is sourced locally which helps in minimizing energy cost of food production and distribution (Qi and Li, 2012b). Sustainability is seen through matters such as zero-waste cooking adopted in the preparation of the various meals as well as the utilization of renewable energy sources in JIFA's kitchens amidst other areas in the tourism sector. Moreover, learning about wildlife at the park may influence the lunches and dinners we have – focusing on sustainable farming and the proper, healthy cooking.
However, the park does not have strictly bounded gastronomic project. One of the ways JIFA creates impact is by sourcing products from local farmers, fishermen and food artisans within the community. Other related programs include farm to table initiatives as well as the local foods markets as other niches through which the sustainable gastronomy could be encouraged and the local economies boosted. They also assist to encourage community dietary cultures that may be faded out by mechanization and globalization processes.

The local food is of great significance for the formation of the culinary image of JIFA. The restaurant proposed by the park is work perfectly regarding its geographical location in the area of Bohai Sea and the policy of using the fresh products from local manufacturers. JIFA tries to follow the local tastes in the context of using different cooking methods and attract both guests and citizens. Due to proximity to the sea, particularly the Bohai Sea, seafood is a significant component of dishes available at JIFA Park. Other facilities offered in include beach restaurants where you can taste various seafood specialties as fresh as they can be having in mind that you are near the sea. Steamed fish is a popular dish is prepared and served extraordinarily erratically from water tanks within the park. This reduces the amount of seasoning used on the fish ensuring that this end product has natural fish tastes. The steamed dish shows that local can triumph simple and fresh by accompanying by a clear seafood sauce and mustard to be eaten with it.
The unique characteristics of JIFA's foods is that the incorporation of sea foods, which are obtained from the nearby sea. Here there are dishes that require a number of ingredients to be steamed including signature dishes like steamed fish. The preparation involves little seasoning so as not to overshadow the quality of the fish that is supposed to be the star product. The fish is usually picked from the live tanks, then served steamed to really lock in all of its natural juices and tenderness. This hyper-seasoning provides the basic foundation, garnishes such as seafood sauce and mustard complement the dish without dominating the taste while appealing to the local as well as international palate. The park's restaurants also offer a variety of traditional local dishes that include traditional foods of the country. Mandarin style pork and leeks filled steam-dumplings are also served, with a shrimp placed on the head of each dumpling, to make them more luxurious. For instance, a crab roe bun, where the bun is stuffed with succulent and tasty crab roe and the flavour of the sea can be seen and tasted in it. These dishes are created from fresh vegetables that are grown in the park own live vegetable factory which produces natural and organic food in the park. The sea urchin tofu, which combines local seafood with Chinese culinary traditions, is the most conspicuous creativity that stands out from an array of meals. It is preferred by families, especially children and the elderly as it is not too spicy hot though has a good taste. It also demonstrates how the park's restaurant reflects modern and historical techniques when offering food tailored to those from different cultures.

The basic aspects that guides the JIFA's food selection is sourcing food that is in season. All the vegetables that are produced in the live vegetable factory are consumed when prepared and can soaked a simple fry with vegetable to incorporate some complex meals. Due to its efficiency in the production of vegetables throughout the year, the factory acts as a reliable source of fresh and healthy meals for the park's culinary department to prepare tasty, as well as healthy, meals. The focus on freshness not only makes dining much more enjoyable but also contributes to the goals of the park, namely, sustainability and healthy living. Apart from the current services, JIFA also integrates factors of experiential dining in its food services (Trip, 2025). The visitor is able to attend cooking demonstrations and a cooking academy through which they are able to prepare local dishes using products from the park. These features allow to get acquainted with cultural and agricultural background of the cuisine and develop better understanding of its cultural value.
The delicious local food at JIFA Park helps to provide people with the necessary cultural perspective about the region. Located within the sphere of local cuisine, the park helps tourists become closer to the idea of their country's food culture by offering dishes that are cooked in a traditional manner (Trip, 2025). The dining also becomes a chance for cultural interactivity as peoples' get to interact with chefs who explain how they prepare food and where they get their ingredients from. Although IFA Park has restaurants which help in the promotion of local dishes there are likely to be issues relating to quality and availability of food stuff throughout the year.

4.2. Hungarian case study: Fish soup brewing tradition and cult as a gastronomy tourism attraction in South-Danube region

The South-Danube region recently is divided three sub-regions belonging three different countries: Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. The Hungarian part involves three counties Tolna and Baranya counties in the west and Bács-Kiskun county in the east. In Croatia Osijek-Baranja county while in Serbia West Bačka District as a part of Vojvodina province in North-Western Serbia belong to the South-Danube region. An important feature of the South-Danube region is the colourful Hungarian, Serbian, German/Swabian, Croatian, Bunyevci, Sokac, Jewish and Roman ethnic composition. Concerning tourism potential South-Danube region has very valuable scenery with wide selection of tourism attractions and unique potential for cultural tourism, water tourism, ecotourism and gastronomy tourism as well (Vörös and Gačnik 2023). Cooking and consuming fish soup is an indigenous, still-living gastronomic tradition and cult along the South-Danube region. Fish soup served with noodle chopped in matchstick form is a very popular dish cooked at least once a week alike in family households living in villages or towns on both sides of the river. It is also a compulsory offer in all local and regional restaurants' menu. The residents of these multi-ethnic, multi-religious region with a rich gastronomy tradition all cook the same type of fish dish, regardless of nationality or religion. The fish soup cuisine has been originating and widespread along the river from the town Apatin in the south, which is only 75 km distance from town Baja, to the town Paks in the north. The town Apatin, recently belongs to Serbia, but it was an ancient Hungarian settlement in the history developed into a town by settling Swabians into this territory mainly in 17-18th centuries from North Germany(Vörös and Gačnik 2023).

It should be noted first of all that the original South-Danube fish soup substantially differs from the other Hungarian types of fish soup (e.g. Tisza or Körös river or Lake Balaton). It necessitates to use five main culinary components: fish (mainly carp plus cat fish), salt, red onion plus garlic, red ground pepper and water. Except for salt all of these ingredients produced around Danube regions and are available locally The basic difference is that the fish must be cooked freshly just after killing the living fish. Therefore, it doesn't need to be

pasteurized and doesn't contain any pre-made parts. The soup served with "matchstick noodle" freshly kneaded and cooked separately in salted water. The soup with noodle is the main dish, and then not filleted fish slices can be the second course. The obsessed followers of fish soup cult say so that "fish spoils in the third water," so no one can brew and eat fish soup without wine. Therefore, the wine is organic part of a fish soup brewing and feast. The rule of paring the soup and the wine appropriately: because it is a pepper dish not white wine but red wine is the best choice (Vörös and Gačnik 2023).

Hungarians call this traditional paprika-based fish dish "fisherman's soup" which can express well the history and origin of this special cuisine. The custom of eating it with noodle closely related and forms an integral part of the South-Danube fish soup which has also long history in connection with the ancient fishing and watermill activities in the South-Danube region. Based on ethnographic researches the origin of the fisherman's soup goes back in time to the lifestyle and habit of Danube Swabians in Apatin where fisherman and water millers had been working with close cooperation. Certainly Danube fishermen had invented themselves and started to prepare this meal during their daily work along Danube banks in open air in their caldrons. The Danube was the source of the carp and cat fish, the basic culinary element. This explains the origin of the name. Concerning the noodle, a book written on ethnographic cuisine (Erdei 1971) referred a legend about mill masters in Apatin who had been obliged to give their miller boys a bowl of hot meal every day, but the "stingy" employers gave only a small bowl of fish soup, which was not enough for the lads. That's why they came up with the dough, which could be prepared easily from the flour processed in their own mill so they started to serve fisherman's soup with noodle. We can conclude that this gastronomy masterpiece had been invented by the team of South-Danube fisherman and water millers. Anybody who could ever taste this authentic dish must be able definitely believe the truth of this ethnographic research findings partly based on legends. (Vörös and Gačnik 2023).

Fish soup is not only a staple food of people living in this region but a central element of the festivals and cooking competitions organized in settlements along South-Danube, of which the summer fish cooking festival of Town Baja is the best-known. The small historical town, Baja with recently nearly forty thousand inhabitants, also known as the "Capital Town of Fish Soup", represents an attractive destination for increasing domestic and foreign tourist. The town is pride of the high fish consumption: the yearly per capita consumption of fish is 35-40 kg, well over not only the Hungarian country figure (6.5 kg) but EU average figure (23.3 kg) as well. From the year of 1996 this regional and local gastronomy speciality has been celebrated a special family and local community event organized as the "Family-friendly Fish Soup Festival of Baja" every year. During this summer event fish soup fans, group of family friends are preparing fish soup very traditional way in big caldrons in the centre of the city and nearby. „Taste the famous Baja fish soup and join 2,000 teams of locals and visitors as they cook the traditional spicy, paprika-based river fish soup over open fires, creating a unique community experience in this small town on the Danube" this promotion of the event published in a website on the page entitled „Discover 10+ exciting Food Festivals in Hungary" (Continentaltravel, 2024).

In the first years of festival period the families have been the main role in entertaining fish soup cooking with organizing a summer festival but during the time the event became more and more a gastronomy tourist attraction. During festival weekend the downtown is filled with rows of caldrons, almost the whole town is involved in celebration with cooking. The former residents are usually returning back to the "mother-land" to attend in the event. The number of total guest participants attending in this widely known summer festival event all together can reach 20-30 thousand people.

The fish dish and the indigenous gastronomic tradition achieved national quality brands. The 'Fish Soup of Baja' got in the Collection of Hungarikum[1] in 2015 , a relevant domestic quality label (Hungarikum Collection 2023) and 'The Living Tradition of Baja Fish Soup Brewing' got in the list of UNESCO National Register of the Intangible Heritage in 2021. This was due to the active contribution of local civil organizations e.g. the Baja Fish Soup Champions Association (BFSCA). A fan group in FACEBOOK entitled "I like 'Bajai' Fish Soup" established to support civil initiatives which has recently around 5,000 members visiting and posting photos and comments daily. Therefore, it justifies well the identity and keen interest of local society as well as that "fish soup cult" is a living reality in Town Baja.

Ethnographic, sociologic as well as gastronomy tourism research studies (Kivela and Crotts, 2006, Pusztai, 2007, Emmendoerfer et al.2023, Brachinger 2024). well explained the relevant meaning and role of living tradition of fish soup brewing for the local society and people living in the region:
"One can therefore argue that gastronomy is a complex, interdisciplinary activity….an inter-related branch of art and science that has a direct relation with chemistry, literature, biology, geology, history, music, philosophy, psychology, sociology, medicine, nutrition, and agriculture. The term 'culinary' often used in the context of gastronomy that describes a country's or region's dishes, foods, and food preparation techniques, which give rise to the country's or region's distinctive cuisine" (Kivela and Crotts, 2006 pp.354-355).
"What is fish-soup like as a brand? First of all, it is far more than a simple fish-dish. As a real brand it represents a concrete complexity of values and feelings. A good brand guarantees prominent quality without proof. Quality we became used to. Moreover, it represents values we can identify with and rely on." (Pusztai, 2007).
The importance of local residents in the developing process of gastronomy tourism is becoming one of the key elements. They are sources and validators of local history and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. Gastronomy can be an important inducer of new knowledge and relationships, boosting the economy while using sustainable principles as a guide for local development (Emmendoerfer et al., 2023 p. 59).
"The "living tradition" with all its elements and mediating mechanisms proved to be a successful integration and socialization tool for the local society of Baja. Among the various manifestations of the culture of the cult, there is a transfer of value between generations and the transfer of committed citizens towards less attached citizens. The impact of the living tradition of Baja fish soup on contemporary social relations can be found in the popular, mass cultural layer as the intention to create and preserve traditions. The sacred and secular components are also part of it. Value broadcasting also has many informal and formal, civil and institutional mechanisms" (Brachinger 2024)

During the history the Town Apatin, located in West Bačka District in North-Western Serbia, have been completely transformed in terms of ethnic composition in a way that Swabian-Hungarians almost eliminated from residents. Owing to its proximity to the Danube and the forests and preserving gastronomy traditions of Swabians became also a popular place for tourists. It became a gathering place for recreational fishermen on the event called "Apatinske Ribarske Večeri (Apatin Fishermen Nights) taken place yearly on the first day of July, and lasts five or seven days. Among the tourism attraction the so called Fiš Paprikaš should have an important role supported also by the Tate Atlas website: "Where to

[1] Baja Fish Soup in Hungarikum Collection: https://hungarikum.hu/en/content/baja-fish-soup

Eat the Best Fiš Paprikaš in the World?" (Taste Atlas, 2023). Visitors armed with fishermen's soup cuisine expertise tasting Fiš Paprikaš can easily establish that it is essentially the same authentic indigenous traditional version of fish-dish what had invented by Swabian fishermen and mill masters of Apatin. Concerning cross-border cooperation examples between town Baja and town Apatin are still rather few but the twinning between Baja and Bezdán where a fish soup cooking event called "Vojvodina Gold Caldron" held every year with the participation of local government delegation and best chefs of BFSCA the civil organization from Baja.

Based on this recent case study research it can be concluded that communities and decision-makers in cross-border sub-regions Hungary, Croatia and Serbia have to focus their actions to accelerate cooperation towards a more specific, concrete and comprehensive direction, in order to integrate the tourism resources of neighbouring countries. It would be possible to exploit advantages and to create a recognisable tourism brand by mobilizing resources in order to transform South Danube region in an authentic and sustainable perspective. (Vörös and Gačnik 2023).

5. Conclusions, lessons and future research

Significant structural differences between urban and rural areas have arisen as a result of China's fast economic growth and accelerated urbanization. Despite employing roughly 22.8% of the country's workforce, agriculture only contributes 7.1% of GDP, indicating a growing imbalance that called for policy interventions aimed at urban revitalization. Chinese rural policy has shifted from subsistence-oriented methods to integrated development strategies since 2005 as a result of a series of reforms. With its emphasis on high-tech agriculture, infrastructure investment, environmental sustainability, and closing the gap between urban and rural areas, the 2017 rural revitalization strategy represents a major turning point.

A prime example of how agricultural modernization can be successfully matched with sustainability, cultural preservation, and rural tourism is the JIFA Ecological Agriculture Sightseeing Park. JIFA represents a multipurpose development model that incorporates ecological farming, food education, experiential tourism, and community involvement rather than just operating as a production-oriented agricultural site. By promoting direct connections between producers and consumers, increasing food production transparency, and fostering local identity through culinary and cultural programming, the park embodies the fundamental principles of AFNs. The values of SFSCs JIFA's operational philosophy are very similar, especially in regards to the importance placed on local resource value, trust, and proximity. In addition to boosting rural economies, this new type of agri-tourism raises public awareness of sustainable food systems. As demonstrated by JIFA Park, the combination of ecological agriculture, rural industrialization, and experiential tourism in China offers a multifaceted model that is in line with the objectives of rural revitalization. In the meantime, new opportunities for using technology to expand local food networks are suggested by the role of digital platforms like "Village Taobao." Its success points to the feasibility of socially inclusive and technologically sophisticated rural development models based on AFN. JIFA serves as an example of how China's top-down policy approach shows how digital platforms, immersive food education, and high-tech ecological farming can support consumer engagement and rural revitalization as well. Future studies should look at the initiatives' long-term socioeconomic and cultural effects as well as how well they adapt to different regional contexts in China and abroad.

In Hungary the share of agricultural sector in GDP (3.2%) and of country's total labour force (4.4%) is relatively low and has a decreasing tendency. Compared to other EU countries' figure it's atypical with very high share - 81% of total agricultural land - of arable farming. After EU accession in 2004 Hungary started to revitalize local agricultural production and food supply by utilizing EU subsidies and new support measures available from the European Agricultural Fund for rural development. Owing to this policy measures several different forms of SFSCs has started to grow rapidly promoted trust, shared values, and food quality assurance. Hungary made efforts to utilize subsidies provided by the CAP to reduce regional disparities and improve conditions in rural areas but certain unfavourable tendencies shown that still much to be done in order to exploit these relevant resources more effectively. Some research studies published recently highlighted the controversial practice of rural development and proved that the policy and the connected subsidy and support system have not been successful enough.

Concerning the Hungarian case study preservation of the local gastronomy heritage, traditions and culture in an innovative way is able to support and further strengthen a significant community-building effect in South-Danube region. Due to the active contribution of civil organizations the 'Fish Soup of Baja' got in the Collection of Hungarikum in 2015 and 'The Living Tradition of Baja Fish Soup Brewing' got in the list of UNESCO National Register of the Intangible Heritage in 2021. The organization of local community fish soup festivals and joint culinary touristic and cultural programs are based on the active participation of local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in agriculture, fishing, catering and hotel accommodation helps to create also local and regional jobs, generate entrepreneurial spirit and income and increase local tax revenues. Gastronomy tourism festivals organized yearly can effectively contribute to increasing the awareness of the region and promoting the image of Town Baja "the Capital of Fish Soup" both domestically and internationally. The South-Danube region has a unique potential to develop eco-tourism jointly with gastronomy tourism. The development of fish soup tourism has an economic multiplier effect, which in the longer term contributes to the sustainable development of rural territories. A number of ethnographic, sociologic and gastronomy tourism publications highlighted the relevant meaning and role of living tradition of fish soup brewing for the local society and people living in the region. Concerning cross-border perspective in three neighbouring countries (Hungary, Serbia and Croatia) it would be possible to exploit these advantages and to create a recognisable tourism brand by mobilizing resources in order to transform South Danube region in an authentic and sustainable perspective. Therefore, all of these justify well the creation of values in local food chains and the process how gastronomy tourism can be relevant driver of the development of AFNs.

By connecting regional ingredients and culinary stories to place and identity, gastronomy tourism enhances this bond even more. The Baja Fish Soup Festival and food-based tourism experiences in JIFA are two examples of how food culture can be turned into a source of economic diversification and tangible social capital. Sustainability principles, as demonstrated by zero-waste cooking initiatives, local sourcing strategies, and ecological education components incorporated into both examples, can particularly strengthen the intersection of food, culture, and tourism. According to these results, future studies should compare the governance systems of AFNs in various socio-political systems, look at how resilient they are over the long run, and assess how important food security and sovereignty are in various settings. Furthermore, as a facilitator of local-global integration, the expanding role of digital technologies—from Taobao Villages in China to online local food platforms in Hungary—deserves more research.

Transnational AFN models that strengthen ecological and cultural interdependence can be developed through cross-border collaboration in food heritage and gastronomy, as is the case between Serbia Croatia and Hungary in the South Danube region. In the end, gastronomy-based rural tourism and AFNs represent more than just alternative systems; they mark a paradigm shift in our understanding of sustainability, community, and food. China and Hungary provide complementary insights into creating the food futures we all envision by establishing food systems rooted in local knowledge, ethical production, and meaningful experiences.

The comparative case studies of China and Hungary highlight the revolutionary potential of short food supply chains and alternative food networks in creating resilient, culturally embedded, and environmentally sustainable food systems. Despite having different histories, both nations demonstrate how the fusion of tourism, gastronomy, and agriculture can be a powerful force for social innovation and rural development.

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