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## Can Organic Agriculture Feed China? Report on the International Workshop on Food and Sustainable Agriculture in Beijing An Xin<sup>1</sup>

The **International Workshop on Food and Sustainable Agriculture** was held at Renmin University, Beijing, China, from March 12 to 15, 2010. The workshop's co-organizers included the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development of Renmin University, Rural Development Institute (RDI) of Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), Action 2030 Institute, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), and the Third World Network (TWN). Centering on the theme of food and sustainable agriculture, the workshop provided a platform for discussion and debate of a number of issues related to agriculture and rural development in China and around the world.

### **Changing patterns of small farming**

The most debated issue during the workshop was whether organic agriculture can feed China. But what are the current conditions of small farming in China? Some presentations were dealing with this issue, that is, from my point of view, a key for understanding this debate.

One of the presentations was from Professor Song Yiqing from the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy, Chinese Academy of Science. She and her team conducted field research in a mountainous region in southwestern China, which has undergone many changes in agricultural production in recent years. First there has been an increase in

the cultivation of plants of higher economic value and in poultry husbandry; secondly, rural residents are losing interest in farming; thirdly, most peasants have abandoned intensive traditional cultivation practices, which place greater demands on labor and time. In addition, the research team also noticed a sharp increase in peasant income from non-agricultural activities. Urban wage labor has become the major source of income. Peasants relying on traditional farming account for only 10-25% of all households while peasants in transition, specialized peasants, and rural-urban migrants account for 55-70%, 3-19%, 3-10%, respectively. In conclusion, Prof. Song summarized that the region has moved from the traditional pattern of males working the farmland and females taking care of the household to a pattern of males working in the city and females working on the farm instead. The dissemination of agricultural technologies still relies on interpersonal communication between peasants, and the diversity in breeding is declining.

### **Are peasant's rights protected?**

Two other major issues were also singled out for discussion. One is the newly established rural land circulation mechanism and the status of farmers' cooperative development in China. The land tenure system was spotlighted, as there has been an increasing concern that the circulation mechanism might lead to peasants losing their land. Professor Kong Xiangzhi and Professor Cheng Shulan, both from the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Renmin University, responded to the concern. Prof. Kong gave a detailed presentation on the background to the government's decision to establish the rural land trade mechanism and concluded that "the policy on rural land circulation adopted during the third Plenary Session of the 17<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee was the summation of a series of previous policies and

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See also Hintergrundinformationen Nr. 14/2010: Uwe Hoering with his report on the same conference.

laws." Prof. Cheng Shulan, however, emphasized that only if the peasants' rights to their land are confirmed can those rights be protected more forcefully. She uttered, "First we need to make sure that agricultural land is owned by the agricultural population before we demand that that land be designated for agriculture use only," a statement seemingly aimed at easing concern that with more rural land coming onto the market, more will be transferred to non-agricultural use since other uses often promise greater economic returns due to China's rising real estate prices.

Specialized Farmers Cooperatives (SFC) have been deemed by many as the major way of helping small farmers gain a better position in market competition. According to Professor Yuan Peng, from RDI of CASS, there were already over 240,000 properly registered SFCs by the end of 2009. (The law on SFC has been in force since July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007). With 21,000,000 participating households, SFC members already represented 8.2% of all rural households. However, numbers do not tell everything. As Prof. Yuan pointed out, there are questions about how many of these registered SFCs are operated in accordance with the law and can be counted as "real" SFC. There is evidence that many SFCs are controlled by farmers who command large amounts of social or material capital. How democratic governance can be realized and the interests of small farmers safeguarded needs to be given more thought.

### ***How to understand organic agriculture***

Could organic agriculture feed China? This is a very intriguing question. Before presenting the debates, I would like to introduce a new definition of the term organic proposed by An Jinlei, a workshop participant and a peasant who practices organic farming on his own land in rural Hebei Province. It goes like this. Organic means that in an ecosystem, every organism is endowed with a right to survive. In Chinese, organic is compounded by two words, "you" and "ji", which mean "to have" and "chance" respectively. I think this is a very interesting way of interpreting organic because, in China, the concept of organic is mostly just a direct translation from the West even though many claim that it originated from ancient China. An Jinlei's interpretation, in my opinion, lends the word a more Chinese connotation.

Quite a few presentations argued that organic agriculture is a "must" for China. The argument was mainly made in three dimensions. In the environmental dimension, Mae-Wan Ho, from the Institute of Science in Society, quoted from China's

recent National Pollution Census stating that agriculture produces worse pollutants than industry, "discharging 13.2 mt pollutants into water, more than one third of the total of 30.3 mt." The second dimension relates to resources and climate change. Mae-Wan Ho pointed out that sustainable agriculture not only saves energy (by reducing the use of nitrogen fertilizers) but produces less emissions and can perform carbon sequestration functions as well. Dale Wen, from 2030 Institute, focused her presentation on the impact of sustainable agriculture on water resources. She argued that as water sources become increasingly scarce, China must divert to organic agriculture, which is less irrigation-intensive than industrial agriculture and will help to rehabilitate the ecosystem. The last dimension, which was less talked about but also deserves attention, concerns nutrition. According to Dale Wen, Chinese, on average, consume 50 g of oil a day, which is far more than what nutrition research organizations recommend.

### ***Localising the food-supply-chain***

Starting from the concept of a short-chain-food economy, a kind of food supply chain that emphasizes local material and local consumption, Tan Xuewen from RDI of CASS, however, questioned whether a short-chain food economy or alternative agriculture could shoulder the bulk of modern agriculture. "Maybe not" is his answer. He argued that in light of rising consumption and demand for seed, labor, etc., China cannot wholly rely on alternative agriculture. In his view, the road map for developing modern agriculture in China must involve internal reform and a process of transformation to "ecologize modern agriculture."

Claude Alvares from the Organic Farming Association of India extended the debate on whether organic agriculture could feed the world. He introduced a new model of organic certification that they apply in India. In the 'participatory guarantee system' (PGS), "local groups of farmers conduct the farm appraisals themselves and maintain a group watch to ensure that all follow the standards and rules"<sup>2</sup>. This approach is supposed to significantly relieve the financial burden on peasants for certifying their organic produce. It could be of great relevance to China where small peasants usually cannot afford organic certifying fees.

Shi Yan, a PhD candidate from Renmin University, offered another case study on community supported agriculture (CSA) practice in rural Beijing.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://ofai.org/certification/>

Little Donkey Farm is the demo project operated by Shi Yan and her colleagues from Renmin University along with a local NGO. They showed, as the title of her presentation suggests, that the growing middle class in China will have a greater impact on small farms, be it in form of opportunities or challenges.

### ***Impact of globalisation on the situation of farmers***

The debates and the case studies will not be the end of China's rural reform and readjustment to rapid social change. Also the workshop was not restricted to the question of whether organic agriculture could feed China. Globalization and its impact on Chinese peasants was another interesting topic of discussion. Liu Denggao, speaking on behalf of the China Soy Association, pointed out that, with China importing much more soy beans than it produces, it is getting increasingly difficult for Chinese soybean farmers compete in the market, and many of them have to turn to other ways of providing a living. He warned that the government should be attentive to policy maneuvers by multi-nationals. While acknowledging that imported soybeans account for almost 75% of what is available in the market, Hu Bingchuan, from RDI of CASS, emphasized that attention should be paid to anti-monopoly instead of anti-MNC measures. The amount of imported soybeans is the consequence of the huge gap between demand and supply in the market, and anti-MNC policies cannot solve the problem anyway.

Professor Zhang Xiaoshan, from RDI of CASS, held a summary speech at this session. He specified the impacts of China's entry into WTO on China's agriculture and Chinese peasants. In terms of agriculture, China went from an agriculture trade surplus country to a trade deficit country in 2004, with the deficit rising from USD 4.64 billion in 2004 to USD 18.16 billion in 2008. As more and more foreign companies enter China's agriculture market, especially some huge producers of genetically modified seed, the question of how to guarantee food security poses a crucial challenge to the government. As regards peasants, Prof. Du pointed out that the central government has turned to a policy of industrializing agriculture and is promoting a model of "enterprise plus peasants" to enhance the competitiveness of China's agricultural sector. However, how to protect peasant interests in negotiations with large companies is an issue that has so far not been properly addressed. And since enterprises, be they domestic or MNC, are becoming the major entities organizing agricultural production, they can be expected to hinder peasants in forming their own organizations. In turn, this will cripple them in protecting their rights and interests.

The three-and-a-half day workshop was as extensive as intensive, and this report only covered the discussions of greatest interest to the author.

## Bisher erschienene Hintergrundinformationen

- Nr. 4/2010, 12.4.2010, Uwe Hoering, China: Nachhaltige Ernährung und Landwirtschaft. Ein internationaler Erfahrungsaustausch
- Nr. 3/2010, 22.2.2010, Staphany Wong, Kopenhagen auf Chinesisch: China und die Klimakonferenz
- Nr. 2/2010, 21.2.2010: Tienchi Martin-Liao: To Touch On the Root of the Evil: Who is afraid of Liu Xiaobo?
- Nr. 1/2010, 22.1.2010, Staphany Wong: Copenhagen in Chinese: What did the Official Version say and how did the Civil Society and Media act
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- Nr. 13/2009, 22.10.2009, Berit Thomsen: The Sky's the Limit in China. How, despite difficulties, the farmers strive for self-sufficiency
- Nr. 12/2009, 21.9.2009, Eva Sternfeld: Biologischer Anbau "Made in China"
- Nr.11/2009, 28.8.2009, Fu Tao: 30 Years of Civil Society
- Nr.10/2009, 11.8.2009, Eva Sternfeld: Organic Food „Made in China“
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- Nr. 8/2009, 18.6.2009, Katja Levy: Emergency Law, Patent Law, Social Law - Celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Sino-German Rule of Law Dialogue Initiative
- Nr. 7/2009, 7.6.2009, Katja Levy: Notstandsrecht, Patentrecht, Sozialrecht – zum 10. Geburtstag des Deutsch-Chinesischen Rechtsstaatsdialogs
- Nr. 6/2009, 22.5.2009, Xu Youyu: "June 4th Pro-Democracy Movement Seminar", Beijing 2009, Meeting of Chinese Intellectuals to Commemorate June 4th
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- Nr. 4/2009 - 22.3.2009, Nora Sausmikat: Civil Society Dilemmas in Dealing with China
- Nr. 3/2009, 7.3.2009, Peng Xiaowei, Wang Ximing: Die Rolle von NGOs bei der Regulierung und Steuerung öffentlicher Krisen
- Nr. 2/2009, 6.1.2009, Christa Wichterich: Trade Committee of the European Parliament advocates Business Interests in relation with China
- Nr. 1/2009, 2.1.2009, Nick Young: Mit dem Feind reden
- Nr. 4/2008, 25.11.2008, Pierre Rousset: France-China relations or the pre-Olympic psychodrama in perspective

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