
13/2009 – 22.Oktober 2009

The Sky's the Limit in China

**How, despite difficulties, the farmers strive for self-sufficiency
and the civil social movement gains power**

Berit Thomsen¹

In Feng Village's town hall, a village in the south Chinese province of Guangzhou, a small group of old women gossip in a confused and agitated manner, gesticulating with their hands and then falling silent again. Li Bo from the environmental organisation Friends of Nature translates: "Their families have had their leaseholds taken away from them. Their children have moved to the towns in order to earn money." A farmer recounts that she received 30,000 RMB for selling 0.8 hectares of land. This is approximately 3,100 Euros. She tried to negotiate for at least a little more, but was told: Either take the money or leave it. The new landowner is now the university, the South China Agricultural University.

Feng Village is a station on the information tour titled "Global Concerns - Global Cooperation?" the Asian Foundation for the EU-China Civil Society Forum and the Chinese partner Friends of Nature. For two weeks, Chinese, Austrian and German representatives from non-governmental organisations had the opportunity to share information and experience.

Genetic technology alongside organic

A student at the South China Agricultural University runs through a paddy field. The clayey earth squelches under foot. He describes the universities ecological rice cultivation tests. Ducks devour the insects at certain growth phases and poultry manure is used as an organic fertiliser. That way it's possible to avoid using pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Lower rice profits would be supplemented by the additional sale of organic duck meat.

He also points out the open land tests for genetically modified rice, corn and bean plants with the same enthusiasm as he had previously spoken about the ecological farming. A Chinese environmental activist asks him: "How is pollution prevented?" Student: "We have our methods." Environmental activist: "And what are they?" The student gesticulates with outstretched arms and says: "With a wall." Regardless of the effect, there were no walls to be seen in the fields. The genetic engineering tests were also not displayed. Chinese politeness prevents any further critical inquiries.

"There won't be any intense public debates about genetic engineering", said Fu Tao from the English-speaking online forum "China Development Letter". "We are aware that tests are being carried out on the cultivation of genetically modified plants. Therefore, in the event of government authorisation, the companies will be ready to go".

Migration to the towns

Chinese villages can be found nestled in green paddy fields. The inhabitants appear to comprise mainly of old people and children. They sceptically observe the visitors with their digital cameras. According to official records there are 200 million migrant workers in China. At the end of the 70's a figure of 30 million was being discussed. Experts estimate that 90 per cent of the migrant workers are in fact farmers. The Chinese non-governmental organisation Global Environmental Institute (GEI) justified migration from the countryside to the towns by stating that the average salary in the towns is approximately three times higher than that of the rural areas. Very few farmers have an academic degree. Therefore, they end up earning poor wages in factories. "This work is dirty", said Li Bo.

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The migrant workers move in part for more than 10 years to the towns and return home when their children are older. "The variety of land reforms is a problem for the farmers. They have to constantly adjust to new situations and don't know what to expect next", said Li Bo and adds: In addition, there is hardly any market transparency and it's also difficult for them to realise adequate prices for their products.

The German agricultural engineer Thomas König from the Centre for International Migration and Development (CIM) has the impression that, despite everything there is no fluctuation in agricultural production. He's been living and working in the southeast interior province Jiangxi since the end of last year and says: "Acreage here is extremely intensively utilised, there are no fallow fields as in Germany." If the farmers don't use the fields themselves, then they are mostly leased. After all, 700 to 800 million people still live in the countryside and farming is an essential revenue and supply source.

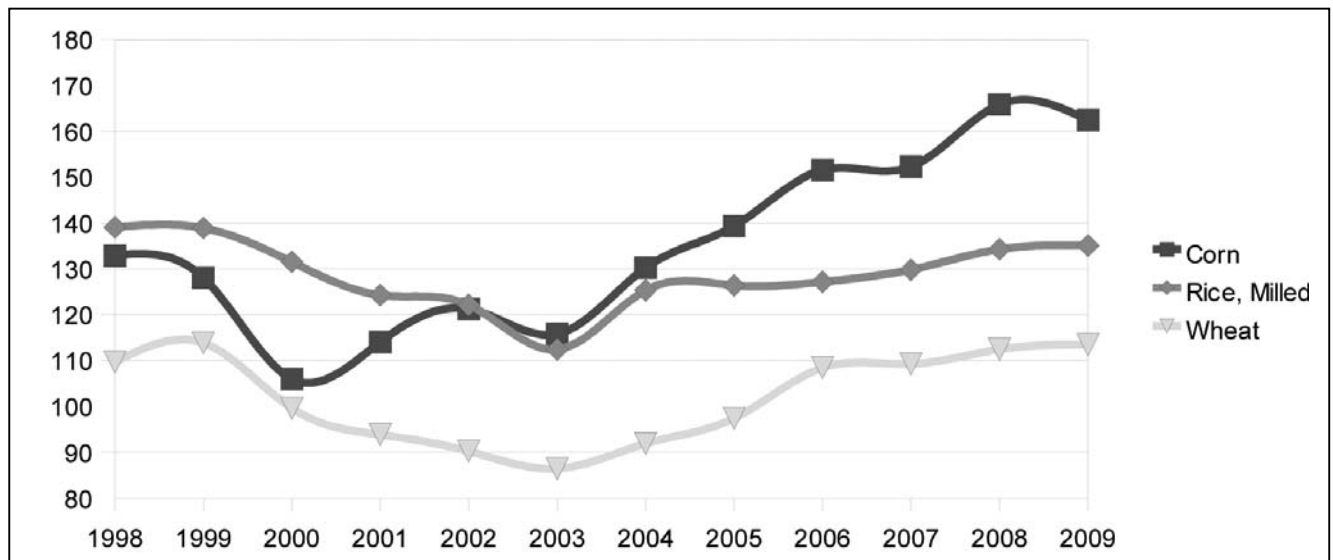
Small and efficient

According to the U.S. Ministry of Agriculture the average farm size is 0.6 hectares. If the figures from the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) are correct, then production of the main cereal crops wheat, corn and rice have increased

2004/05. Milk production has also continuously increased to 37.8 million tons in 2008/09. Ten years previously it was only 8 million tons. Similar to the years before, in 2008/09, whole milk powder and fresh milk have an export surplus of 19,000 tons and 29,000 tons, whereas an import surplus of 52,000 tons has been ascertained by skim milk powder. If these surveys are at least somewhat accurate, then the statements of some market analysts must be critically questioned if China is once again to become an important consumer of agricultural products on the world market.

To enable this development, in 2003, Beijing's leadership abolished agricultural taxes and increased purchasing prices. In addition, converting fields to building land has been banned. At least 95 per cent of agricultural products should be self cultivated. This is the way China's government wants it, hence, intermittently working with export restrictions.

"In order to make life in the countryside more attractive, investments are pouring in through the state programme "New Socialist Countryside" for, for example, small biogas constructions enabling gas production" As a prerequisite for this construction the families have to keep one or two pigs, and it's already working", said Thomas König. He knows about a report by the Asian De-



within the last years (see diagram)². China has been a net exporter for years with the exception of the financial year 2003/04, when more rice and wheat were imported than was sold on the world market and as well, wheat in the financial year

² Unabhängige Bauernstimme, Figures based on USDA datas. Production corn, rice, wheat in million tonnes

velopment Bank, that alone in 2007, 24 million of these constructions were built nationwide.

The new movement

The information tour has not only pointed out the problems but also the potentialities involved in small-scale farming structures in China. And one

more point: A new movement is growing alongside the well-known environmental sins. 16 years ago Friends of Nature, the first environmental organisation was founded. Today, there are approximately 2,000 non-governmental organisations being financed by the government or foreign sponsors. Almost 20 per cent thereof are student movements. The student volunteering commitment seems remarkable. They critically tackle the problems of topics such as climate change, water pollution control or farming. Even when for most of them their future occupations won't be in civil society, thus, this knowledge reaches management levels in the government and the business world.

How does the working group for rural farming (AbL) work?

The AbL is a non-governmental organisation which represents rural political interests, and members of the AbL include both conventional and ecologically worked farms. At the end of the 70's a group of farmers merged and founded the AbL in Germany. The main reason for this was that the predominant German farmers' organisation (DBV) principally represented the interests of the food industry and the large-scale structured, rationalised agrarian companies, but not the farming population which predominantly manages small, medium-sized, labour intensive and ecologically compatible enterprises.

Farmers can become a member of the AbL by paying an annual subscription fee. At the annual general meeting the farmers vote every two years for the AbL's managing-committee, which consists of farmers who work out the positions and political strategies. The AbL management and employees implement the managing-committee's strategies. The farming community knows which basic conditions are most necessary in agrarian politics in order to operate their farms effectively and on a

long-term basis. At any rate, it is important to genuinely incorporate the farmers when working on agricultural issues.

Working with other civil social groups

What distinguishes AbL's work in the first place is the exchange and approach of identifying mutual operations for proceeding together with representatives of other civil social groups from environmental and animal protection, consumer protection, development policy, human rights or unions.

Through this a socially broad and strong lobby can be formed.

An internationally prepared scientific study provides particular background information about the civil social cooperation in Germany: International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) <http://www.agassessment.org/>. This study was, among others, commissioned by the World Bank and was published in spring 2008. The over 400 authors were clearly critical about the direction of the agrarian and trade policies in many countries of this world and they have called for a world-wide reversal to rural and adapted farming in order to face and overcome the challenges of hunger, the increasing world population, climate change and oil shortages of the future.

This study could provide a basis for a more in-depth dialogue between Chinese and German/European organisations concerning the farming issue. In any event, it is of great interest for the AbL to exchange information and experience with organisations in China, thereby becoming aware of the concerns, problems and chances in these countries.

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Herausgeber: Asienstiftung für das EU-China-Civil-Society Forum.

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Das Projekt „EU-China: zivilgesellschaftliche Partnerschaft für soziale und ökologische Gerechtigkeit“ wird von der Europäischen Union gefördert. Die vom Projekt vertretenen Positionen können in keiner Weise als Standpunkte der Europäischen Union angesehen werden.