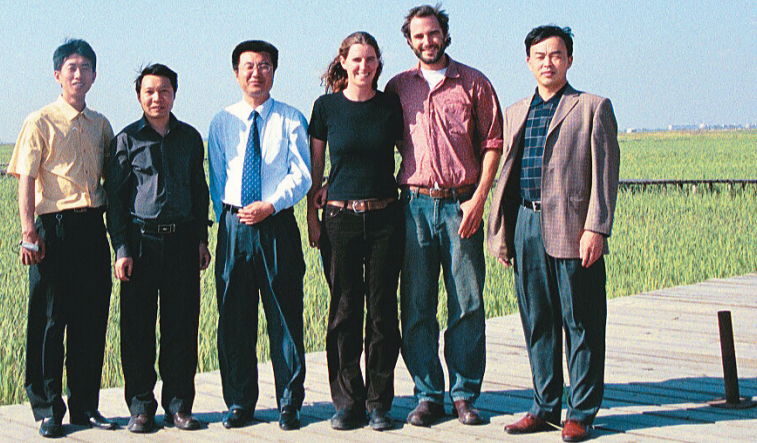


An organic world

A postcard from China



If you follow the seasons and make proper use of the land, you will not have to put in much effort and will still get good results. If you do as you please and go against Nature, your labour will be in vain.

From the *Qi Min Yao Shu*,
by Jia Sixie, 544AD

By SAM STATHAM and SIMONE Le MESURIER

"No GMOs" said the customs and quarantine video played on our Air China flight as we descended for landing. Behind the words, an image of millions of small, pea size seeds – soy beans ... and behind the image, a message to the world – China is protecting its heritage and security by protecting its seed bank and farmland. As organic farmers, we had nothing to fear, as our budget flight arrived at midnight in Beijing, capital of China.

We certainly never expected to find a lot of organic farming in China, but our expectations were shattered. Organic farming is taking off in China as it did in the West in the 1990s. Organic farming is seen as a top environmental priority by regional governments, and organic food is being increasingly sought after by the managerial class. The largest certifier of organic foods, the Organic Food Development Centre (OFDC) is now accredited by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), proving itself to be world-class and professional.

Organic living may not be the privilege of the masses in China, but its benefits are being realised by many people. When you think that the years of severe famine that from 1959 to 1976 probably killed about 30 million people, you wonder how a country of 1.3 billion people, could possibly "go organic".

In June this year, my fiancée and I went to China to find out – linking up with OFDC by offering to do slide show presentations of Aussie farms. We were amazed at their hospitality. They took us to a pig farm, rice farm, composting factory, rice processor and vegetable farm, all certified to the OFDC standard.

We started at Panjing, Liaoning Province, one of the largest producers in China of petroleum. It is a very new city, whose GDP ranks among the highest in China. It is also a model "Ecological City", designed with lots of trees, wide avenues with gardens, and new parks. We found this a funny contradiction – a petrochemical capital earmarked as a model green city!

However, the dedication of the Panjing govern-

ment to the project is most serious. It showed in the strong relationships that our tour leader, Dr Yin, had with all of the people who we met on our tour. The first was an organic pig farm, which was a winner of the Top 500 environmental projects by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in 1999. The OFDC-certified farm runs about 6000 pigs with 120 staff on about 20 hectares. Although not truly "free range" (that is, with constant free access to outside pasture) the pigs have plenty of room to move and good concrete pens, like two-storey terrace apartments. There are large "play pens" where they are periodically let out to run around, and the whole "pig village" is surrounded by beautiful gardens and flower beds, walkways covered in trellised grape vines, canals and ponds of water where the "salad" is grown for the pigs to eat. Some of the ponds contained greenhouses for the winter salad production, others had fish. Not a bit of space wasted, fruit trees even on the pond walls. The pig waste goes into the municipal waste system, though some of the water is reused in the ponds.

The manure end of the business was the subject of our next destination. Whizzing past more rice paddies and huge south-facing greenhouses we entered a large yard with an apparently converted factory building now producing a Dynamic Lifter-



type product from pig and poultry manure. This is a new complex, supplying organic fertiliser to local farms.

The next stop was an organic rice farm. Although surrounded by conventional rice paddies, there were ample buffer zones, and the abundant irrigation water was direct from the river. We saw a range of different frogs in the paddies and the reedy irrigation channels, always a good sign. They use crabs to control insect pests in the paddies. Weed control, we guess, is by hand weeding and flooding. The farmers prefer the old rice varieties for their flavour and performance in organic conditions. They receive a premium of about 30%. Compared to the farms here in Australia, this is rice growing in its perfect environment.

Stopping at an OFDC-certified rice processing and packaging plant, we saw a great range of packaged rice, both conventional, "green", and organic – proudly bearing the OFDC logo.

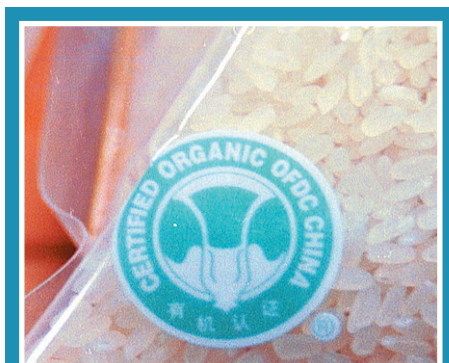
After doing other "eco-tourism" at the World Heritage wetland and the seaside, we gave our slide show presentation to the local government. That night, we had a banquet at the new-looking Pan Jing Ecological Restaurant. As the guests of the pig farm manager, a very lively man fond of rice wine and "gambe" (toasts and skulling of rice wine), we had a splendid meal of seafood, organic pork, and a few culinary surprises. The main hall is fully landscaped with gardens, ponds, waterfalls, mini rainforest, sculptures, cloistered eating areas and a larger than usual display of fish tank menus. The restaurant was hugely popular, full of people, with heaps of expensive black sedans parked outside. We hoped that this, and the rest of our day tour, was a sign of things to come in China.

Next we flew to Nanjing, the home of OFDC. With a population of a mere six million, Nanjing is a beautiful city, as clean and efficient as any in Australia. As a former capital it has the city walls and Ming dynasty tombs, a temple to Confucius, and a high level of education and industry.

We were met by Mr Chen ("Richard") and Miss Ma for our long-awaited day tour of Planck Organic Farm. The first stop was Richard's original Planck organic vegetable shop, in one of the richer managerial suburbs of Nanjing. The Planck Organic shop featured excellent information displays on organic farming, clean and minimalist presentation of a good range of vegies all produced on his own farm. There are eight Planck shops across Nanjing but Richard plans to have 80 shops in the next five years.

We jumped back into the Citroen and sped at 140kmh out to the Planck farm, some 70km south-west of Nanjing.

As we passed through the local village, Richard explained how each rural household is entitled to a plot of land, with which they can do as they please. Richard, after looking far and wide for the ideal site for an organic farm, chose the location because it is sited right below a pristine lake fed completely by a natural forest reserve – no agriculture permitted. Professors and researchers from Nanjing Agricultural University have provided technical support to the farm since its establishment. Located at the foot of Qihu Hill, Lishui County of Jiangsu Province, the farm employs about 30 local villagers (80% of them women) on 90ha, 33ha of which is under cultivation for vegetables. About 30% of that area was under glass-



The most important thing is to allow the people to live in peace. They cannot be taught until there is abundance.

*Preface from the Qi Min Yao Shu,
by Jia Sixie, 544AD*

houses, we estimated. Weeds dominated the remaining uncultivated land, which is progressively being brought into OFDC-certified vegetable production.

The farm is centred on a lane with about 20 poly greenhouses down each side, each about 50m by 5m in size. Inside was all manner of leafy and fruity vegetables, furrow irrigated and generally very healthy. The farm has 70 different types of organic vegetables. We noted that the outdoor crops were hardier but lower yielding than the indoor crops. We saw some of the workers out hand pulling or hoeing weeds, planting new seedlings and training tomatoes on bamboo stakes.

We bid the farm goodbye and drove back to Nanjing – last stop the Nanjing University. Here we met about 15 of Richard's newest shop staff – all women – learning all about organic food and farming in a special 10-day course.

Thanks largely to OFDC and other organic certifiers, more than 300 kinds

of products were grown organically last year in about 300,000ha of farmland and certified in China as valued at more than US\$400 million. The products include tea, honey, soybean, buckwheat, wheat, sunflower seeds, pine nuts, pumpkin seeds, walnuts, condiments, milk powder, and some traditional Chinese medicines.

As we left OFDC to continue our China trip, we felt inspired that the benefits of organic living are now being realised at an accelerating rate. We hope that organic farming can help to make China a cleaner and healthier country, and look forward to learning and sharing more information with them. ■

Sam Statham works at Rosnay Organic Farms, a mixed co-operative farming project in the Central West of NSW, producing ACO-certified organic grains, vegetables, olives and wines.

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