

China Biodynamic 2016

The time had come again to head off to China, a destination I have become fond of and where I have developed solid friendships.

Some of the names in the article have been mentioned many times in previous reports that can be read in old newsletters. Shui Yun is our farmer from Taiwan and Tien is our main farmer from Malaysia. They both have excellent farming operations and a very good understanding of the Australian Demeter Method. They have helped me immensely on these trips.

I arrived in Xian, in Shaanxi Province, late in the evening on June 1st, about the same time as Tien, and was picked up by Dahei and Huguang. We went to the centre of Xian to a motel and there we caught up with Peili and even though it was quite late already we still went for a chat and eat.

Ping, a participant from last year who cooked me an Italian meal, arrived from Italy in the next morning and with pasta, bread, pesto, cheese and salami, to help supplement the Chinese food. She was to be my 'chef' while in Xian. Xian is both her and Dahei's hometown. So they took us on a tour of the old centre of Xian and its fortress wall. We also went to visit the terracotta warriors at the tomb of the Emperor Qingshihuang. It mirrored exactly the reality of the army of that time Infantry, Cavalry, Archers, Officers and Generals. The Qing dynasty was the first to unite all of China but was also the shortest dynasty.

On Friday we met with Shui Yun in the morning and went to Dahei's farm in Jingyang where he has twenty acres of beautiful clay-based soil on flat land. He is currently growing wheat and maize and has plenty of irrigation. He is looking to diversify into some vegetable production as well. Only about half of the farm had been deep ploughed and the result and the changes after a green manure and 500 were very evident. You could actually see the ploughed area from a distance and feel it under foot the moment you stepped onto it. The structure and humus formation was extremely good after such a short time. A great example to have for the following seminar. The wheat was very nice and almost ready for harvest. The maize was young and was a little yellow as it was planted a bit soon after the green manure but it will be quite ok. (Ensuing photos from Dahei proved this to be the case).

During the day Dafeng arrived. Dafeng first attended a seminar in Malaysia five years ago, he took the knowledge home and put it into practice. It was Dafeng's results that got me to China in the first place and we held the first seminar at his farm in Chengdu. He had to leave that farm soon after but he is now looking for new farmland in his hometown.

The first day of the seminar in Xian had arrived and about 60 participants turned up ready for their introduction to Australian Demeter BD. The usual topics were covered and we started training Peili as a seminar translator. Peili has been a great help to me over the last four years, as a translator, organiser and good friend. She has been to Australia for the preparation making.

The field trip to, and examination of Dahei's soil gave all participants a great example of soil structure and humus development that can be achieved in a very small amount of time. Also there were plenty of white hair roots seeking out the newly developed humus.

On the second day of the seminar all went as planned with Tien and Shui Yun giving their usual quality presentations. There was the usual excitement after the seminar with participants full of enthusiasm, that I am sure will fade for most as usual. There were a few who stood out as real possibilities for future development.

Monday was the first time we had organised an advanced session for the practise group of farmers and this was attended by about twenty farmers who have started their biodynamic journey. There was much varied subject matter, sharing of information and observations. Many of the questions were of a practical nature and it was also positive to recap some of the basics as well. Considering the different farming operations and climates of Shui Yun, Tien and myself we were able to provide good practical assistance to the farmers who themselves were from different parts of China.

Dahei has also arranged for a Chinese BD plough to be made and the prototype arrived that evening. This is essential for the BD development in China as in most areas it is the rotary hoe most widely used, always accompanied by the standard hard pan underneath. The plough worked very well. Dahei is also undertaking to make stirring machines and the appropriate equipment for making 501.

Next morning we had breakfast together and said our goodbyes to Dahei and Dafeng. Shui Yun, Tien and myself headed off on separate farm visits as we could cover more ground by working independently. Peili and I were to go to the citrus farm of Malone (Lv Yongxiang), one hour outside of Changde, Hunan. We arrived at the farm late, had some very good home cooked food and a lengthy general chat on Biodynamic agriculture.

Malone's farm is ten acres with very little flat land making the task of maintenance quite difficult. There are three slopes with terraces, each facing a different direction and with a different soil type. There is a small flatter section in a valley. The mandarin and orange were all suffering in different degrees, some from lack of fertility, some from disease, and with the pasture and weeds right up to the trunk of the tree. There are some quite vigorous and unwelcome weeds in what I loosely call pasture. The pasture management, including keeping the trunks clear of grass, is difficult and expensive in this situation. The terraces are too narrow for tractor work but the small walk-behind mulcher would work ok in most areas. I suggested also to try some careful flame weeding around the trees, once the pasture was cut, to help them keep clear.

There have been three sprays of 500 and there is definitely soil development happening, with changes in structure and humus development. But it is slow because he cannot rip the soil to help. He has been introducing different legumes to the pasture and we also found a couple of native ones as well. He is worried about the deficiencies that his trees show but had made a commitment to his customers to not use water-soluble fertilizers. And he does not trust any of the organic inputs anyway. I suggested to try some rock dust for a trace-element supplement, especially since there was soil biology evident. Seems this is a new concept for him and he was happy to give it a trial.

On Thursday Malone drove us to Changsha and we headed to Taizhou, in the province of Zhejiang, to prepare the final seminar. We arrived at Taizhou and were picked up by Li Jinbo. Three months earlier Jinbo was one of the four Chinese who had visited Australia on a preparation-making trip and stay at my farm. It was late by the time we arrived at the farm and settled in. We had a beautiful meal prepared with produce from the farm. The seminar food would all be provided from the farm as well. Tien and Shui Yun arrived and we had the chance to discuss our farm visits. I do not have enough detail to report on their farm visit.

Next morning we looked around Jinbo's farm, it is a 50 acre mixed farm where he produces rice, vegetables, fruit and meat. Jinbo's introduction to biodynamic farming was via Demeter International. He had got no result from this and was about to give up biodynamics totally. He met Guangshu, a young Chinese man with a keen interest in biodynamics whom I had met in my first trip to China. Guangshu was working on a farm for Demeter China at the time and attempting to make the preparations. He decided to leave and pursue the Australian Demeter method. He also came on

the preparation making trip three months earlier. Guangshu introduced Jinbo to the Australian Demeter Biodynamic method and I linked them both to Shui Yun for mentoring. The farm is showing signs of Biodynamic development, mostly in the plant expression and flavour, with the soil showing early signs of development. They have been using a plough from Italy but have the rehabilitator from Australia ordered. They are in the process of building a new greenhouse with better tractor access for deep ploughing and green manuring. After his trip to Australia, meeting Alex and others, Jinbo is passionate to achieve our results.

Saturday was the first day of the seminar. Dahei and Dafeng had both travelled to Taizhou to help out. We decided to split the 50 participants into groups based on where they were from and appoint an experienced leader to each group, Shui Yun, Jinbo, Guangshu, Dahei and Dafeng were given the task. This worked well as they could reiterate the important basic points and take questions relating to these. I decided to get Shui Yun to run the farm inspection as he is a very fine and knowledgeable practical BD farmer. Also to have a break from the concentration of translation. The day was long but all the participants were full of energy and discussion, and after a meal I left them to it.

Sunday started by covering the practical basics of applying the preparations. We had the mentors to teach their group hand stirring, overseen by Shui Yu, Tien and I. They selected their best for a 20 min stir off, with me to select the winner, of which there was none of course. I always spend the last session recapping the basic principles of our BD method and the major practical points to consider to be able to start the BD journey. While the enthusiasm was plenty we will see how many actually start. As usual we are more interested in the quality of farmer that starts and the results they achieve, than the quantity of farmers starting. As soon as the seminar ended it was time for goodbyes as I flew out that night. The goodbyes, or 'see you later mate' (taught them this here), have become more meaningful and emotional each time, especially as we have now developed a good core group in China.

The overnight trip home only allows for some semblance of sleep and the reflection on the trip begins. On my first trip to China I made it clear that I wanted to build no reliance on me or BDAAA and that the mission was to make them biodynamically independent. After four years I feel we are getting somewhere as this year was different. As mentioned a good core group has developed, they have been given, and taken, more responsibility in presenting our method, based on results gained by a practical understanding. The Chinese voices have begun to develop and speak. There are about 50 practicing farmers in 15 Provinces, admittedly with varied levels of success, but with some into their fourth year of practicing the Australian Demeter method. As I mentioned four individuals, that basically presented themselves, have been to lay and lift the preparations and had valuable time with Alex, Lynton, Trevor and Lyn, and others. I thank those that have helped out by doing this for them.

I still make no personal profit from this, but these trips are rewarding in so many other ways. Strangely though there always seems to be a personal price to pay for these trips.

Darren Aitken

