

# Australian Demeter Biodynamic Method in China

In the below article there are names of people from my last two trips to Malaysia. The articles can be read in your old BDGAI newsletters or at [vortexvegies.com.au](http://vortexvegies.com.au). Briefly there is Jakob, a BD gardener and compost maker from Maindample, Victoria. He made the initial connection between Ng Tien Khuan and me a few years ago. Tien is a Demeter certified market gardener in Malaysia. Tan Kia Swei, KS, is a BD fruit grower in Malaysia and he, along with Jacob, have provided the main push to get me to China.

Last year when I went to Malaysia there were some Chinese farmers that attended the seminar that I ran on the Australian Demeter Biodynamic method. After that seminar some of the Chinese farmers said that 'we have been to BD seminars in China and all we heard was Steiner, Anthroposophy and cosmos and we would get back to our farms with no idea what to do. Now we can make a start'. They had asked me to visit China to introduce our practical biodynamic method there. I told them that if they got results that I could speak to and show others then I would go.

KS had been to see some of the farmers in China, not long after the seminar in Malaysia, before they started our BD and was in contact with them for us to assist them if needed. They already had our translated practical notes from the seminar and had built storage for the preparations. The main two that started were Tar Fong in Ya Di, Sichuan province and Peng Ying Hao in Wa Su Hung, Guangdong province. Both had tried the Demeter International, anthroposophical style BD and preparations with no result. They started our method, using our quality preparations and practices and were amazed at the result. They had reported good results to KS and had created interest from these results among other farmers. They invited me to visit, so I decided to go to China and run a seminar on each of these farms in May 2013. The trip was organised mainly by KS, with much help from Tar Fong and Peng.

On the way to China I went to Malaysia for 3 days, to inspect the Cameron Highlands farm of Tien and to look at the development of his other farms. All is developing very well and his certified farm produces very high quality vegetables. You can read more on Tien and others in Malaysia in previous reports. We visited other farms that are in different stages of converting to BD.

Tien also came to China to translate the seminars and farm visits and was aided by KS. Jakob was to run the compost making component of the seminars.

I wish to give a small preamble to this report. All the farmers I met in China were concerned about food security, food safety and water quality. Most were young, under 40 I would say, and nearly all had soil that any Australian farmer would be very happy to have. Nearly all made some compost but none of good quality. On a ratio of soil fertility, land size, labour force and output, the farms are inefficient compared to ours. They are facing many serious environmental problems, pollution, land and water contamination etc. and are looking for a solid, sustainable and health building agricultural system. They seem free to act in certain areas and can be quite individual but have a great ethos of working collectively. The report shall be brief and just cannot cover all that was seen or done.

We landed in Chengdu, Sichuan late on Thursday night and went to the town of Ya Di, near to the village and farm of Tar Fong. We arrived about 3am and decided it best to get a little sleep. Sichuan has a mixed climate, from subtropical to temperate. They can grow vegetables all year and one or two rice crops.

Early next day on the way to the farm we visited the market and by the reaction we caused (positive) I don't think many westerners get here. Tar Fong has a farm in a very beautiful mountain setting with about 3 acres of land in 4 different lots, with some on the flat in the valley and some on terraces higher up. Naturally very good red clay soil, well drained, but with some of it having the tendency to be a bit sticky and compacted. Prior to starting our method Tar Fong had been using the European style preparations with no result. Since coming to Malaysia last year he has changed his cultivation methods, has done some green manuring, used Alex's prepared 500 and has achieved very good results in a year. Tien and KS had both visited Tar Fong previously and were both impressed by the soil development. The soil had developed a darker colour and very good structure, and not so sticky. Tien commented that it was like walking on air compared to his first visit. Tar Fong's main crops are corn, beans, salads, peppers, with some wheat, canola and soy. The plants have good colour and expression and very fine flavour. He sells to the Waldorf School in Chengdu. As well as running seminars it was important to spend as much time as practical with those farmers that had started, or wanted to start, our method and to help them as much as possible. We spent the day on Tar Fong's farm discussing many practical aspects of applying the BD method and market gardening. I was also looking for good examples of plant and soil to show the seminar participants.

Had a meeting that night with a government official who was working with a group of 400 organic rice growers that have formed a co-op and were selling under the one label. He is coming to the seminar to learn more on BD, even though I could not specifically help him with rice growing.

Saturday was the first day of the seminar. There were around 40 participants, most from around Sichuan, but some had travelled up to 1000 km from Yunnan, Shaanxi, Hubei and Chongqing Provinces. The first day included the topics, history of Biodynamics, plant feeding within nature's law, humus, soil cultivation, soil structure and roots, humus formation and soil biology, Biodynamic plant expression, soil cultivation, green manures and Biodynamic sheet composting, using Preparation 500, Prepared 500, stirring, spraying and storing 500. The participants were all given hands on tuition in stirring 500 and 501 with assistance from Jakob, Tien and KS.

This was all interspersed with photos of BD soils, plants, cultivation equipment etc., farm walks to see BD plant expression, root structure, soil structure and many questions of a practical nature.

A bit tired but I visited the nearby farm of Ma En Hong, a participant from Malaysia last year. He has 70 acres and as the village secretary has some standing. He had slowly convinced the whole village to go organic but last year after hearing of the effects of water soluble fertilizers (organic or otherwise), raw manures etc. on plants, soil and water, he had started the task of moving to Biodynamic farming. He now would like the whole village to take that path.

Sunday was day two and the topics included, using Preparation 501, stirring, spraying and storing 501, building a Biodynamic compost heap and using preparations 502-507. As they have the man power and ideal conditions for composting about 4 or so hours was given to this topic and a large heap was made. Although for practical and results based reasons the potential new BD farmers were already leaning more and more towards sheet composting and green manures. This section was run by Jakob and was run very well. I then discussed using the Biodynamic Astrological sowing chart, the Demeter Certification process in Australia and the Demeter BD organizations in Australia. Again we finished with many questions and recapping of some major practical points.

After saying our goodbyes we left to head for Chongyi Town, Dujiangyan City to the farm of one of the participants, Thompson Zhu. It was late so we dined and slept.

Monday morning we started our farm visits with a look at Thompson's farm first. They have a 20 acre organic farm, using mainly compost, with 15 acres under glass. The farm is run as a cooperative with farmers working their own section of the farm. They are on pretty good grey clay based soil and are growing mainly carrot, beetroot, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, pumpkin, corn, tomato and cucumber. It was all a bit 'pushed' and they knew this after seeing the plants of Tar Fong's during the seminar. They have expressed their wish to convert to BD so we gave them some direction and will see how they go.

We visited two other farms of seminar participants, Goa, that started last year and one new into BD, a farm owned by Ah Ming and Goa Ming. Goa Ming had her first introduction from Peter Rynia in Australia while she was training to become a Steiner teacher. They have done a remarkable job in a short time. Both farms are about 5 acres and growing quite good vegetables that they are selling direct to parents of the Waldorf School and to other customers. Again much practical advice was given and discussed for biodynamic improvements on the farm, especially in the area of sheet composting and green manure. I think that these farms will develop well. All the visits were attended by some of the other seminar participants.

Next day we said our goodbyes to Tar Fong and caught the train to Chongqing Province to visit the farm of some of the seminar participants. It was two or so hours out of the city up in the mountains at Pingtan Village, Hong Hu Town. They get no foreign visitors here so again we were the center of attention. It was late so we ate at the farm and went back to a motel in the village. The farm owners had to get prior permission for us to stay here as well as register with local authorities.

Wednesday we were taken back to the farm by the village mayor for breakfast. The farm is run by a small group of people that took over an abandoned school and 5 acres of land, growing vegetables and rice. They had the help of a couple of old local farmers but the production was poor. They had looked at organic farming, permaculture and others with no real success. They have been heavily influenced by permaculture but after a lively discussion all admitted that it

had no agricultural principles or method and could not feed the world. The head of the operation Ju Li could not attend the seminar and was keen to hear more. Those from the farm that attended the seminar were very keen to practice BD on the farm and had gathered other locals to attend the farm visit. It turned into a small seminar with about 15 or so. The farm needs a lot of help, direction and work, but they are keen to start with BD practices. Two young local organic farmers grasped all that was spoken of very quickly and were keen to make a start. We gave as much practical advice as possible in a day and KS and Tar Fong will help them in the beginning.

On Thursday we flew to Shenzhen, a municipality and the closest mainland city to Hong Kong. We were met by Peng and Man Zu, seminar participants from last year. We headed to the village of Wa Su Hung, Huizhou City in Guangdong Province, very near Peng's farm.

Next morning we went to the farm of Peng. This area has wet humid summers and dry mild winters. They get a double rice crop on the low land in summer and grow mixed vegetables on the high land in autumn, winter and spring. With Peng, the farm employees and others we did a farm tour discussing practical aspects of BD and market gardening. Peng had also been to several seminars on the DI style of BD, but had not had any success, mainly due to the lack of practical advice offered at such courses and the poor quality preparations supplied. Since coming to Malaysia he had started our method on his farm and was very happy with the progress. There is good soil development where green manure and prepared 500 had been used. They were making compost, not of a good colloidal quality, and could see that the energy and resources put into compost making would be better off spent sheet composting and green manuring. They could also see that the composted plants were a little pushed compared to the vegetables grown after creating humus via green manure and P500. Overall the plant expression was good but a lot more 501 should be used here. They still have a lot to develop but they are passionate about our method and will do well.

Saturday and Sunday were the days of the seminar. There were around 40 participants, a mixture of organic and conventional farmers, mostly from Guangdong Province, but others from Hubei, Hunan and Henan Provinces. The topics covered were the same as the previous seminar. We discussed in depth the ecological, environmental and plant health consequences of growing food via water soluble fertilizer, compost or raw manure and they seemed to grasp this quite well. This was important as some had been using 3 to 5 ton of organic fertilizer per acre. They were stunned to realize that their system was basically conventional, just using different inputs. Well they thought they were doing the right thing and knew no different as this had never been explained to them before. They understood the reality of building humus via sheet composting, green manure and prepared 500. There was a lot of interest in the machinery used in market gardening. There was a lot of enthusiasm and good feedback from the seminar with quite a few wanting to start BD.

Next day we visited the 30 acre farm of one of the conventional farmers, who was growing vegetables, yams, mulberry and rice. He is relatively new to farming and will have a lot of work to do to convert to BD. We offered some basic advice and will keep in touch to help if needed and see how it all goes.

We travelled to an organic farm owned by an electricity generation company. They are burning Australian coal, quite efficiently using two different co-generation methods (e.g.; taking the heat off the stacks to produce steam to drive turbines) and with quite low emissions. They also have a 1500 acre solar facility. The farm manager/worker, Shen Shan, was surprised at my knowledge on the subject and we both thought it quite ironic that the Australian Demeter BD method would give them a soil that would lock away so much carbon. The farm has 15 acres for vegetables, some under glass, 3 acres of fruit, a 3 acre fish pond and 150 acres to expand. The sole purpose of the farm is to grow produce to share between the 3000 employees of the company. Shen is passionate about his task and is absolutely determined that the farm will convert to BD and has already started, sowing a summer green manure.

Tuesday was a quieter day that was spent in Shenzhen. I met with some of the farmers so they could ask questions that had come to them and to set up a system of advising the farmers starting. Tien and KS were to be the initial contact for advice for those with no English, the questions translated and sent to me and the answers translated and returned. They also got information on and footage of the stirring machines we use, as well as some plans kindly donated by Bill Chandler. Left that night for the Province of Hebei, to Phoenix Farm, right on the edge of Beijing.

Plane delayed again so arrived at Phoenix Farm at 4.30 am Wednesday. Caught a little sleep and then got to work. This visit could be a separate report but I will give it a go here.

Phoenix Farm is the Demeter China (Demeter International) show farm. The farm is in a very beautiful setting with restaurant and accommodation and has been running 5 years, but with no BD result to show at all. They also run courses from DI on BD. The secretary of Demeter China, Weihe, spent a week with me in Malaysia last year but had put none of our method into practice. They wanted my sincere and honest opinion on the 10 acre farm. They were growing vegetables and fruit. We gathered the main workers, a good enthusiastic young crew, and started our tour. We looked at their soil, plants, cultivation, preps they had made (poor quality, but with only DI tuition), storage, stirring, compost, everything really. They have a bit to change but sincerely want to succeed in biodynamic agriculture and had only ever been given the European Anthroposophical biodynamic 'education'. We discussed much in the field, explaining our practical approach to BD at that night I gave a presentation to all the workers, explaining our method and showing our results. I showed them our quality preps, they were absolutely amazed and just that alone was enough for them to realise why they had no result.

Thursday morning I met with the farm owner, as she was not able to come the day before. She said she only had till mid-morning so I gave her my DVD to watch while I went to the orchard. By the time we got back the DVD had an impact as she had cancelled all appointments and now had all day. The day turned into a seminar again and she was amazed at our approach, preparations and results. You could see that she was a little annoyed at spending 5 years with little or no result. At the end she said 'so we can approach BD from a practical perspective and throw the anthroposophical books off the desk, this is great'. She asked for a list of all the things on the farm that needed to be changed for the farm to get results and has asked for help to convert the farm to Australian Demeter BD. We are working on this and will see if it eventuates. They may find it hard to break ties with Demeter International.

Friday we gathered early for our final practical session, hand stirring tuition and many practical questions. We said our goodbyes and the last of the questions were asked and answered as we were heading down the driveway. I was on my way home, job done but exhausted. I had 20 days travel with little more than 4 hours sleep in a row.

China has 23 Provinces and we had reached farmers in 8 of these. Since the visit much has happened. Many farmers are undertaking the preparation and tasks needed to begin BD in autumn. The farmers in all the Provinces are forming an association of BD farmers, practicing our method. We have set up systems to help and advise as best we can. The first stirring machines are being made. We have people with the land to make the preps and students coming to learn such here next year. Two of the workers from Phoenix farm have left to pursue our method on farms elsewhere.

I found China to be an amazing place. We travelled 20 days without seeing another westerner and reached three villages that had not had foreign visitors before. I look forward to a continued relationship with the farmers that are starting our method and to the next trip to China.

Darren Aitken