

TAIWAN AND CHINA BIODYNAMIC TRIP 2014

When I got back from China last year I remember saying to my wife I am never (expletive) doing that again. It was exhausting at times, with some difficulties but none the less it turned out to be fruitful. The difficulties were not only in China, but also with leaving the farm for long periods of time and missing the family as well. Luckily two good workers have made leaving the farm more possible. Duty and responsibility called and the memories of the difficult times had settled, so I headed off again on the 3rd of June for a three week trip to Taiwan and China.

As usual I cannot repeat the history behind these visits and the people involved but they can be read about in previous BDGAI newsletters, BD Growing Magazine and at our website www.vortexvegies.com.au under the Education section.

Also as usual Tien Khuan from Malaysia came as translator and Jakob Meiser came to run the compost making in the seminars.

On the way I stopped off in Malaysia to speak at an IPMT conference, an Anthroposophical conference that had a BD component. Tien and I spoke on the practical Australian Demeter Method in what was otherwise an anthroposophic presentation on BD. It was well received and appreciated, but we could tell we upset the main course presenter from New Zealand, Hans Mulder. They seem to be fixated on compost, which I view as being well back on the evolutionary scale of BD. We spoke of sheet composting, green manure, basic pasture management, air, roots humus etc and spoke of and showed results. The Demeter International (DI) proponents never seem to speak of results. Also met with one of the main men involved in BD in India, Sundeep, again heavily DI associated and influenced. I shared some information with him about our method and showed him our 500, of such quality that he had never seen before. They invited me to visit India, but it is an invite I will have to refuse.

We headed to Taiwan on Friday the 6th and had a full day travelling. We went to run a seminar at the property of Wu Shui Yun on the west coast of Taiwan in a town called Hualien. Shui Yun, who speaks no English but can understand quite a bit, had visited me last year with Tien and I had taken them to meet Alex. He has been back twice, with Tien from Malaysia and Ziqi from China, to learn the making of the preparations. Shui Yun was a Buddhist monk who 'retired' after 15 years to become a BD farmer. He laughs and says he has learnt more about life after 6 years of farming than during his time as a monk. His introduction to BD was the DI style theoretical type, the same course that Tien started with in Taiwan and he had been using the preps from Europe with little result. Tien had maintained contact with Shui Yun and was letting him know of the results from our method and quality preps, hence his first visit last year. He took our preps home, and with a few days of training while here, was amazed and very pleased at the result he got. We had one day to look at the farm before running the seminar. Shui Yun has about 20 acres and grows rice, soy and a few vegetables. He has been green manuring as the main source of building humus in the soil and has successfully incorporated this into his rice growing rotation. He has very good soil structure, plant expression and produce. His rice tasted beautiful and the expression and colour of the plants was amazing compared to his organic and conventional neighbours.

We ran the seminar over two days, Sunday and Monday, 10 hours each day, for about 40 participants. Tien and I have worked many times together now and I can now just open up and let the information flow, in larger parts that Tien is now able to translate. I give him 10% leeway to modify it to the local

language and Chinese psyche and to hit them harder if needed. All the relevant information came out, with a good reception and an awakening on the faces of most participants. When we are on a particular topic I will break up the seminar with a visit to a particular part of the farm to demonstrate what we have been discussing and to make it a reality, eg soil structure and plant expression. You can't just have people sitting there and this also allows for much more in depth discussion and understanding, stemming from the questions that would be asked. For instance when we went to the rice where Shui Yun had an organic neighbour all participants were able to tell in an instant which crop was BD. The two days were run along these lines and the participants were grateful for the practical knowledge we shared. Jakob ran the composting session one afternoon and Tien gave a talk and showed photos of his farm when it was organic and the transition and development to biodynamic that reiterated and condensed what I had spoken of. As a little surprise Shui Yun had organised for a Taiwanese TV station to come along, film some of the seminar and do an interview with me on Australian Demeter BD. He didn't want to tell me in advance in case I said no. He has got to know me well. They had made a stirring machine where their engineer thought he was smarter than our farmers and without informing Shui Yun placed the motor right on top of the vortex with the paddle straight off the motor, because it was much easier. I told Shui Yun, much to his amusement, he was paying the engineer to build, not to think. After a visit to the maker we sorted out what needed to happen and within a day or so he delivered a much better version. We will see what now happens regards BD development in Taiwan and I can think of no better asset there to assist than Shui Yun.

After a very quick and hectic visit we left on Tuesday to go back to Taipei and to fly to Shenzhen, China. We were met there by Peng Yinghao who is the main drive behind our trips to China and the farmer who has organised others from last year into a small association of farmers practicing the Australian Demeter method. They have others helping as well with things like translation of Alex's lectures. They have already translated the 'Biodynamics - A Practical Introduction' to have it ready for this year's seminars. Peng is to travel with us for two weeks and we spent that evening discussing the plans for our itinerary. Also travelling with us is Tan Jin, a lady who is helping a new farmer who took over a farm of Tar Fong, one of our first farmers in Chengdu. As an aside Peng told us that not long before our arrival China had rejected over 100,000 ton of American GM corn, didn't hear that in the news!

Wednesday we went to a Buddhist farm in Guangdong province, near Peng's farm. They have started an organic CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) style farm of 10 acres. They have a tractor and a mouldboard plough that is already beginning to hard pan this naturally good soil underneath. They have 7 workers and one uni graduate and only produce 1.5 ton a month, using raw pig manure and organic fertiliser. Not surprisingly they are suffering pest and disease problems and do not want to kill the insects due to their Buddhist beliefs. They understood the discussion we had about soil cultivation and the ramifications to the plant of water soluble feeding via the soil water. We discussed the use of insect and disease as indicators of poor plant and soil health. They are attending the seminar at Peng's farm.

We headed on a three hour drive to a town called Longmen in the Pearl River basin. There is a program there, run by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN, which is trying to help move farmers away from chemical farming to improve the agricultural land and to try and clean up the water that flows into the river. It is a large mandarin growing area, with rice and vegetables as well, and the trees are suffering severely with many farmers giving up hope and walking away. A lady, Peili, who

attended the seminar last year had pleaded with us to visit and had arranged for the peasant farmers to come for a talk and then for a visit to one of the villages.

Next day the talk was attended by about 70 people, 40 peasant farmers and the rest made up of university agricultural experts (experts is an official term here), government agriculture officials and NGO's from China and Hong Kong. We only had a couple of hours so the talk had to be broad based and if the farmers were interested they would be sponsored to attend the seminar. I had been thinking of a way to really bring across the effect on plants, soil and water of water soluble fertilisers and their total undesirability in our water systems. A couple of days before I had organised for three bottles of water, some chemical fertiliser and some organic fertiliser to be at the venue. While talking to them I dissolved the chemical fertiliser in a bottle and explained, especially so in their high rainfall area, that this product had to end up in the rivers, underground water and the water supply in general. I asked if there were any volunteers to drink or taste the water, there were none of course. I told them of how the experts may then promote organic as the saviour and proceeded to dissolve the organic fertiliser to produce a murky brown liquid with still no volunteer to drink that water. This led to the discussion of what such plant feeding also did to plants and then used the third clean bottle of water to lead into the discussion about humus and BD. This had some interested, along with the fact that I was a farmer and not an expert or bureaucrat. Five or so people had walked out which was a good indicator that they were uncomfortable with the truth of the content. Later we were told that they made organic fertiliser. The farmers were getting restless even with a break in between, so it was lunch and then to the village.

The village leader was a young farmer and we had others from the talk follow us as well, including one of the more open minded university experts. They had some cucumbers dying due to a hard pan created by the rotary hoe, the lack of air in the soil and the poor drainage resulting from this. They could see this once pointed out. We went to a section of mandarins that were in a poor state. The problem is a virus that has no cure and is spread by a particular insect. They spend a lot of money trying to spray the insect and a lot of fertiliser on the trees. The experts would come and take some leaf samples to test and go from there. I showed them how to shake the trunk of a tree to assess root development, scraped bark to look for the green underneath and cut one bad tree and one alive tree off to show them the cambium layer under the bark. It is amazing that a country with such a long history of agriculture has forgotten these basic things. I spotted another field of mandarins nearby and something caught my eye so I asked if we could have a look. These mandarins were putting out new shoots. The village leader said the farmer walked away from these two years ago and they were neglected and due to be removed. These trees wanted to survive and I explained that due to the 'neglect' of not applying NPK for two years, these trees had improved and were trying to heal. I asked if he would only feed his child on sugar, salt and water and he began to understand. I also explained that if he ate well and I ate sugar, salt and water that we could carry the same virus and that he would fare much better. I did not push any more but really feel that with 500 and building humus in the soil the trees would survive and produce.

We left for the village of Wa Su Hung, Huizhou City in Guangdong Province very near Peng's farm. Heading back we had decided to amend the already busy itinerary and fit in a visit to Peng's other farm in Henan. We got back to a meal with all produce coming from Peng, a totally Australian Demeter BD meal in China, several vegetable dishes and rice and the taste was beautiful, much better than last year.

On Friday we went to Peng's farm and, as expected by the taste of the vegetables, there was a great improvement in the soil structure, humus level, hence color, and of the plant color and expression as well. He had taken on many of the suggestions from our lengthy discussions from last year with the main change being from making a lot of compost to sheet composting via green manure. This provided great results. About 6 weeks before arriving the area had large floods with Peng's land and plants being under water. His soil had drained, with no smell and the plants recovered while his conventional neighbor had some water sitting on the top, stinking soil and plants were dying. We had many lengthy discussions of the next biodynamic steps for Peng, and of market garden management techniques and machinery. In some areas and on some crops they use a poly woven mulch for weed control and to stop soil washing in the floods. I told Peng what I do to get most of the weeding done before planting and he will amend that to suit his farm. Also he has recognized that the well structured soil tended not to wash away with the flood water, especially if the roots of the crops were developed so he is becoming more confident in not using any bed covers. I am sure he will do well over the next year.

Had a meeting with the board of the new association of BD farmers which was formed after last year's seminars. It is a good strong small core group of farmers, with many helpers offering an array of different forms of assistance. The main focus is to reach other farmers, to start making quality preparations, stirring machines, and to continue to build their farms as examples of an Australian Demeter BD system.

Saturday the seminar started, with about 80 participants from different parts of China and also Hong Kong. It ran for two and a half very long and busy days.

On Monday afternoon we met with some village and district officials at Peng's farm for them to have a look and for us to speak a little on what Peng was doing. He is wanting to lease the land next to his farm that also has an old lychee orchard. They came to tea to sample the produce and were impressed by the flavor of the vegetables and what they saw and heard on the farm. Peng was granted use of the adjoining land.

Next morning we got up early and flew to Nan Yang, in Henan Province, with pretty much the same climate as southern Victoria, but not quite as hot summers. We were met by Peng's brother, Bing, and drove to the town of Nei Xiang, which is not far from Peng's other farm. The existing farm is 600 acres on the side of mountains with south facing terraces for growing various fruit and grapes. Nothing had been done to the farm for a long time and this is a work in progress that I was looking forward to seeing. Over lunch I was asked if I would meet with the Communist Party chairman of the state, Chairman Meng, and other officials to speak with them about Peng acquiring a new piece of land next to the existing farm and that the media would be there as well. Peng said that the meeting, farm visits and what I said were to determine if he got the new land. This is what Peng had been madly organizing since we decided only four days ago to visit Henan. I got Peng aside and explained, with translation, in no uncertain terms that I did not like putting show before substance and that he had better get results if he got the land. I also told him that I would only agree because I had confidence that he could do it based on the result from his other farm. We headed to party headquarters for a meeting before going to the farms. Chairman Meng was quite excited by our visit. He had read much translated material on the

Australian Demeter method that Peng had provided and was very interested in the potential of our method to provide good soil, clean water and especially good food. We were met by several officials and members of the agriculture department. All of them relatively young and with a serious interest in food safety and security. One guy was a little 'cool' so I asked if there was a problem and he could ask anything. He asked if we were making a lot of money from this. Once we explained that we had our costs covered and actually left our farms and families for no personal gain he was amazed and warmed up immediately. This actually gained the admiration of all the officials. After some talking we left to visit the land that was available to lease. It is 170 acres of cropping and market garden land, adjoining the existing 600 acres, with permanent water. We took a fork and headed off with all the officials to examine the soil. First we looked at some of the natural unfarmed soil on the edge of the field before examining the, by comparison, mined out soil on the farm, still good by our standards, and still with great potential to develop. They were all on their hands and knees looking at the roots, the soil, and examining the hard pan that was developing because of the poor cultivation methods. They could understand the basics of green manure, humus, compaction etc. We visited the second farm that has a soil from a purple slate base and is the most amazing color. More digging and talking, with an explanation of building humus with permanent pasture. Well they must have liked what they heard and saw and after a discussion with Peng he came to me and said that they would get the land. I smiled and enquired when that might happen, he laughed and said we are going to sign the contract now and they get it from tomorrow! I was asked to give an address at the Party headquarters after the contract signing, by which time there were 50 or so people there, and the Party TV station and newspaper. As a base for this address I used a report that the Chinese government released before I had left home, that up to 20% of Chinese land was contaminated. I looked the Chairman in the eye and said that if this was the official figure it may well be double and he smiled and agreed. It was good to talk to them about what should be the real role of agriculture, healthy soil, clean water and nourished people, not the opposite as seems to be the agenda of so called modern agriculture. We went for a lengthy meal and celebration. The Chairman was openly excited and admitted that while this could be good for the soil, the water, the food, and the people. It could also be good for him politically, as they were to supply water to Beijing in the future and it would help if that water were clean. These were bureaucrats such as I had never seen, young, clear thinking and quick acting, and honest. It was pretty much decided that I would visit next year and would run a seminar for other interested farmers. They, like I, will watch with great interest the development of this farm.

On Wednesday we went back to the farm to find a site for a 500 pit. The site just presented itself really, good aspect, good slope, good soil and easy access. We discussed some detail of making the pit and the 500 before leaving to catch the bullet train to Taiyuan in Shanxi Province where we were met by one of our farmers, Ziqi. Ziqi has been to Australia to learn prep making from Alex and Frances and to visit myself and other farmers.

It had been quite wet that night and we travelled to the farm the next morning. All the farms around Ziqi's had water lying on top whereas on Ziqi's farm all the water was taken into the soil. This was much needed as there had been a long dry spell. Ziqi grows vegetables, millet, wheat and soy on 25 acres of good clay base soil. She has been using our BD method for a couple of years with very good results. She

has replaced composting with green manure and prepared 500 as the method of giving back to the soil and building the humus bank. They only have a three month growing season here and so greenhouses have been built to extend the vegetable season. The results have been very good and all the produce is sold direct to consumers and is very much sought after. Before I left Australia, Bill Chandler had kindly made a stirring machine to export to Ziqi and so we unpacked and tuned the machine ready for use.

We headed to the airport, with Ziqi joining the group, to fly to Chongqing for the next seminar and were met by another of our farmers, Wang Zonghao. We headed straight to the farm for a look as we did not get to see this farm last year. This is another property with excellent conditions for making the preparations so we looked for sites to make the 500. Again this was easy as the site logically presented itself. The soil is again very good although there are a few areas that are compacted as I pointed out to Zonghao. The produce from there, a large variety of vegetables as well as eggs and fish was once again very satisfying and of a fine flavor. There are not a lot of sunny days here and most crops would benefit from the use of 501 when the chance arises.

Friday was the start of the seminar with about 50 participants and again for two and a half days, with the water bottles and fertilizer samples ready as well. By Sunday afternoon all had gone well as indicated by the faces and response of the people there. Here we said good bye to Tien, my translator and helper and Peng, the drive behind it all. Jakob, Ziqi, Tan Jin and myself all headed to Chengdu, in Sichuan province for the last two farm visits.

The next morning we went to the farm that was started by Tar Fong, one of the original Chinese farmers who came to Malaysia three years ago. He is now becoming a monk and the farm is run by Yuang, a farmer who was at the seminar here last year. We spent the day doing a bit of recapping of the basics of our method, checking the stirring and spraying techniques and looking at the farm. It is still in good condition and I hope that with our help Yuang can build on the good start.

My last day and time for one more visit to a farm that we visited last year after a seminar, the vegetable farm of Guomin and Aming. They are producing vegetables for the Chengdu Waldorf school parents and provide a good array of nice vegetables, although again this is not a sunny area and would benefit from 501 use much more frequently than used now. The original grey clay soil has good structure and color change and Aming is aware of the need for more green manure crops in the planting rotation.

It was time to leave China for now, this time totally fulfilled and satisfied with what we had done and with no apprehension at all to return next year, indeed I am looking forward to it.

There is just so much more that happened on farms, at the seminars, meeting with the government officials and in general conversation with other farmers that I just cannot share in this article.

Darren Aitken

