



## ***Book review***

# **Good Food for all: Developing Knowledge Relationships between China and Australia**

**Bruno Mascitelli & Barry O'Mahony (editors), Ballarat: Connor Court Publishing, 200 pp., A\$29.95, 2014.**

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Characterised by varying degrees of ambition, goodwill and risk, this book evolved from a more hard-nosed sounding forum entitled 'Knowledge exchange of quality food production and distribution between China and Australia'. Held in Wuhan, China, in November 2013, the forum was hosted by Huazhong Agricultural University in partnership with Swinburne University of Technology (SUT).

Significantly, the book editors, Associate Professor Bruno Mascitelli and Professor Barry O'Mahony along with Dr Jue Chen, all from SUT, were the successful recipients of an award from the Australian Government through the Australia China Council, with the latter sponsoring the 2-day forum.

The editors, their co-workers and co-contributors are to be congratulated on this fast track publication which "emanated" from the forum "to provide some scholarly treatment of the event" from "invited experts and scholars" (p.vii). All the more congratulations given the diplomatic pathways that the editors presumably had to steer to complete the project with respect to cultural, pragmatic and institutional sensitivities for both Australia and China. While not necessarily made explicit, some sense of the path to project closure is evident to this reader threading through the "diverse" contributions (of interest is the Forum Program listed in the Appendix).

The preface by renowned chef and culinary ambassador, Tony Bilson, is indicative of the diversity among the Australian contributors. The preface advances the optimistic perspective that exchanging knowledge while exchanging food needs to be underpinned by cultural exchange, albeit driven by mutually profitable trade. "The sheer size of the market demands partnerships between Government, industry, academia and the arts" and "will demand a greater cultural sensitivity from Australians" (p.xii).

While the overall result is not unequivocal, the volume could well be useful as a reader for food and related studies, also for critical discussion in other areas such as international relations and socio-economic disciplines. It is of interest for a broader readership wanting to become both informed and challenged by easily accessible presentations (for the most part), ranging across issues of food production systems with special reference to knowledge exchange and export within the wider rubric of food security. In both countries, it may assist the citizens' right to know and could well raise questions about the distinction between knowledge and the spin that can be confounded with knowledge.

The compare and contrast exercise between China and Australia, while underpinned by some serendipity, is structured by the growing trade between two nations for whom geographical distance is probably the least of their differences. All in all, this reader came out better informed about basics of agricultural trade and export of food with information and discussion, sometimes surprising, sometimes fascinating, bestowed from a variety of socio-historical and economic perspectives (for a more theoretical discussion with a public health emphasis see the account by Jo En Yap et al. in Chapter 4).

On matters of presentation, it would help the busy reader to have more summary profiles of essential basics relevant to the export activities both countries tabulated along the lines of the table in Chapter 3 which compares organic food & agriculture with the wider international picture (p.53). On matters of substance, where does climate change enter the picture and what of genetic modification (see below)?

In the chapter “Opportunities and Challenges for organic food and agriculture: China and Australia” organic food is described as “food grown without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, without genetically modified organisms (GMOs), nanotechnology or irradiation” (p. 50). This is accordingly indexed under GMO along with one other citation (p.160). Perhaps a more extended treatment of GMO’s in agriculture was left to the Chinese speakers (presumably due to publish their own version of the Forum composed, we are told, of 10 speakers from each ‘side’).

Earlier in Chapter 2, the Australian agricultural sector was credited with “a strong research & development (R&D) base ranking it among the best in the world” (p.41). It is claimed that this helps Australia combat the challenges of climate variability and poor soils to maintain “its leading position of producing food on the driest continent rife with low quality soils around the world” (p.41) with Australia able to export over half of its total annual agri-food production.

Against this general scenario of Australian agriculture, how does the organic sector rate? To measure progress and identify trends for organic agriculture, John Paull cautions that “the organic data sets for both Australia and China leave much to be desired” (p.61). So in order to present a comparative profile on the Australian organic sector, the indefatigable researcher draws on data supplied by international sources (FAO 2014 and IFOAM in partnership with the Switzerland Research Institute of Organic Agriculture profiles of international data in *The World of Organic Agriculture: Statistics and Emerging Trends* vols. 2011-2014).

Thus, Paull is able to present a credible profile of Australian organic agriculture in comparison with China, and it makes for a most interesting discussion. So, as if not to be over-shadowed by the glowing portrayal of the Australian agricultural sector earlier presented, Paull makes the case for both Australia and China as “global organic leaders” in export. Many readers of both the book and this Journal will be intrigued by this account. The case that is made therein is the best that can be made given the available data which he admits to his credit leaves much to be desired. Why so?

If Australian agricultural R&D ranks among the best in the world, why is it necessary to turn to internationally compiled data to profile the organic sector? Any answer is a longer story than can be told here. One historical pointer from Paull’s account is Lord Northbourne’s 1940 prediction, strongly suggestive of a division between organic and

other agriculture, namely, that supporters of the “organics idea” would be “fighting a rearguard action for many decades, perhaps for centuries” (p.51). For the most part, the organic sector in Australia has produced its own research & development largely by vigorous grass-roots efforts by ‘their own’ organisations of organic practitioners (typically under-funded and often subsidised by volunteers). At the national level, those mentioned herein include the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture in Australia and the former Biological Farmers of Australia now Organic Australia Ltd. (Perhaps to wit, see the co-authored report the *Australian Organic Market Report* produced in 2012 by the BFA, cited by Paull).

Against this background, I take issue with Paull’s comment that in Australia “there is no push from the organic sector....to inform the public or proselytise on behalf of the organics sector” (p.74). However, I agree with his comment that “there is no push ...from the government to inform the public or proselytise on behalf of the organic sector” (p.74). If confirmed in the future, the very success Paull predicts for Australian organic export activity will have come about on the backs of organic practitioners and their certifying and other organisations. All this with little benefit or funding from the academic and agricultural R & D infrastructure which has tended to favour their conventional cousins (family or corporate).

Circa 2008, the website of the Primary Industries Research Department of South Australia as listed by the State Library of SA contained no reference to organic farming that I could locate, suggesting a tardiness to publicly recognise the significance or achievements of organic farming. Of these and like matters, the public and consumers have a need to know, because one direct consequence is that the ‘organic idea’ has been little conveyed to the public by the largess of the relevant public purse. Instead volunteer organisations such as the (then) Soil Association of South Australia (Inc.) conducted information programs for both practitioners and the public.

Things can change quickly and Paull’s discussion is well worth attention as food for thought as to how change might happen. As hinted by Paull, sudden growth and change in the organic sector may entail pitfalls for the very ideals and ethics that have, to date, underpinned organic farming as the basis, presumably, for much of its appeal to consumers. This despite the half admiring comment by one insider in the Primary Production bureaucracy that I recall that “conventional farmers have a lot to gain from denigrating organics” (circa 2003). I would welcome further consideration and knowledge exchange between Paull and perhaps others in this volume in conversation with an audience of organic practitioners and their representative organisations within Australia.

Much more could be said about this book in other contexts. One article to pinpoint, which like Paull’s looks back as well as forward, is Rita Parker’s attention to matters dire relating to food security (climate change here rating mention). Parker highlights the spectre of armed conflict and national security as a significant dynamic in the analysis of food security, touching on the modern evolution of international concepts and infrastructure (UN & G20) used to address world hunger.

Congratulations Swinburne et al., this small volume carries a punch above its weight and is the perfect size for the Sydney–Shanghai flight. For contemplation therein why not ponder John Dalrymple’s case study highlighting the innovations and achievements wrought by immigration in the local food supply and processing sector in North

Melbourne. Then while in China, check out his prediction that a similar driver for innovation is occurring there in step with increasing urban migration. While there, you can, still following Dalrymple, demonstrate your expertise of benchmarking in evaluating the quality and diversity of the local food sector, with special reference to small and medium enterprises in providing organic, ethnic, and fusion cuisine. Nice work.

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