

EDITORIAL: ASIAN SPRING FOR ORGANIC AGRICULTURE: KOREA TAKES A LEAD

Dr John Paull (john.paull@mail.com), Editor, *Journal of Organic Systems*
May, 2012

A vote in the bowels of a medieval castle in Vignola, Italy, witnessed Korea win the right to host the Organic World Congress (OWC). This was a quarry that the Koreans had unsuccessfully pursued in Adelaide, Australia, three years earlier. The 15th OWC in Adelaide was the first for the southern hemisphere, and now Korea's victory for the 17th OWC would be the first for Asia.

The OWC is the triennial event where organics people come together - researchers, advocates, producers activists and administrators. Korea as a host for the OWC signals the aspirations of the organic sector in that country, rather than their achievements to date. Korea most recently reported a modest 15,518 hectares of organically managed land, that being 0.84% of its agricultural land (Willer, 2012). Korea only accounts for about half of one per cent of Asia's total of 2,778,290 hectares of organic land. The OWC is however an indicator that Korea is in pursuit of a leadership position in the world of organic agriculture.

The OWC was held at the pleasant Namyangju Sports and Culture Centre which is several hours west, by land transport, of Seoul's international Incheon airport, and on the outskirts of the sprawling conurbation of high density urban ugliness that is modern Seoul.

As with previous OWCs, Korea offered thematic organic pre-conferences. These were held "at various sites in Korea" (KOC, 2011, p.19) and may have attracted greater attendances if there had been better pre-event specific information on dates, venue addresses and locations, along with travel and accommodation details and options. There were eight thematic pre-conferences: Aquaculture, Cosmetics, Ginseng, Seeds, Tea, Textiles, Urban Agriculture, and Wine.

Korea was identified long ago as offering agricultural practices worthy of emulation. A century ago a visiting US Professor of agriculture commented that: "China, Korea and Japan long ago struck the keynote of permanent agriculture, but the time has now come when they can and will make great improvements, and it remains for us and other nations to profit by their experience, to adopt and adapt what is good in their practice and help in a world movement for the introduction of new and improved methods" (King, 2011a, p.274). King's book was published as *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan*. In a nod to King's prescience, the title was recently redacted by a US publisher to read: *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Organic Farming in China, Korea and Japan* (King, 1911b). It has taken a century but King's book has been finally appeared in Chinese, translated by Cheng Cunwang and Shi Yan, and published by Oriental Press, Beijing, in 2011 (ISBN: 9787506042284).

Korea's organic food offerings were on display in the OWC demountable pavilions. Korean organic labels are somewhat impenetrable (for foreigners) being in Korean script. What is not intuitive and was probably not obvious to most visitors was that Korea has taken its own idiosyncratic path with organic labelling. There are four label versions, each of which shares the common logo of a stylized blue and green apple with a white core and a green leaf; however below the logo comes a band of colour with Korean text in white. It was translated to the present author as: a dark green band means certified organic; a light green band means organic-in-conversion; a blue band means no pesticides and reduced synthetic fertilizers; and an orange band means reduced pesticides and reduced synthetic fertilizers. Most of the produce and products on display in the OWC pavilions set up to showcase Korea's organic production bore labels other than the fully fledged dark green 'certified organic' mark. Korea's novel four-way labelling regime is a more 'relaxed' organic labelling scheme than we meet elsewhere in the world. Neighboring China, for example, now has a commendably straight-forward single organic label which appears in two versions, certified organic and in-conversion organic, each with bilingual text, Chinese and English.

The Congress had its lighter and darker moments including: a plenary delegate landing noisily but apparently safely on the floor from a disintegrating chair; the then Vice-president of IFOAM, Andre Leu, bravely keeping a plenary session on the move through a venue power failure; and an IT technician falling soundly asleep onto a keyboard and thereby sending a delegate's statistical presentation into a techno-spasm. It was surprising that taxi drivers struggled with Korean addresses even in Korean script, as well as with maps in the local script, and, despite impressive looking GPS navigation units, they resorted to ringing destinations on their mobile phones for directions. Buses were provided to ferry delegates between their respective

accommodations and the Congress venue. The accommodation, none of which was close to the Congress venue, varied from the high-rise Hotel Riviera in downtown Seoul, to the Hanwha Resort which offered share units with 'floor bedding', to the quiet and comfortable suites of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) situated in a parkland setting - although the soft drink, on offer at the KOICA kiosk, bearing the name 'Pocari Sweat' would have benefitted from being workshopped through an Anglophone focus group.

There are some very tangible and enduring outcomes of Korea's first Organic World Congress. There are two volumes of proceedings, a total of 1090 printed pages of peer reviewed research on organic food and agriculture of the Third Scientific Conference of ISOFAR, which are hardcopy documents of the event (Neuhoff *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b). They are useful records for those who attended, and a good resource for those who did not. Some of these papers are available at www.orprints.org. It is an unfortunate lost opportunity not to have them all posted beyond the ISOFAR members-only website and into the Orprints mega-archive of organics research.

When the delegates have all departed and those PVC-tents have been packed away, what remains? For Korea, one remarkable enduring legacy of the OWC is the Namyangju Organic Museum. It is the world's first museum dedicated to organic agriculture and was launched to coincide with the OWC. It is housed in a bold and strikingly modern new building overlooking the Bukhan River (Bukhangang; North Han River). The museum presents a timeline of the history of organic farming beginning with Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course of 1924. The museum showcases Korean traditional farming which we learn is synchronised to twenty four seasonal divisions of the year. The museum has been designed to appeal to a broad audience. It includes interactive experiences successfully targeted at children and families. With its captions in both Korean and English, the Namyangju Organic Museum deserves to attract a broad audience and it rewards a visit (Paull, 2011b).

Each OWC presents an opportunity to refresh the World Board of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) at the General Assembly. The Korean event was notable in ushering in the first Australian, Andre Leu, as President of IFOAM. Andre is an organic lychee farmer from North Queensland and Chair of the Organic Federation of Australia. We share the hope that his ascendancy to the presidency will reap tangible benefits for organics globally, and especially in Asia, the Pacific, and Australasia.

Figures cited at the closing ceremony were that there were: 800 attendees for the main conference (of whom 268 were from Korea); 1163 attendees for the eight pre-conferences (of whom 949 were from Korea); and that perhaps a total of 250,000 people attended the aggregate of main and ancillary events which included the Slow Food pavilion, the Food Court, the 'Organic Sports', the 'Market Festival', the 'Organic Exhibition', the 'G Food Show', the 'Ssamzie Organic Sound Festival', and the 'Bio Tours'.

There were a few lost opportunities for the OWC. There appeared to be no presence of delegates from North Korea, or acknowledgment otherwise that the Korean peninsula was, and remains, split in two by foreign powers as spoils of World War 2. There was also a lost opportunity to showcase Korean food - apparently a fine cuisine, but surely not at its best at the Congress dining hall?

The success of Korea's Organic World Congress was an affirmation of the resolve, the vision, the vibrancy and the persistence, that remain wedded to the odd idea that we really don't want our food pesticided, irradiated, and genetically modified and otherwise corporatised, industrialised and patented.

The OWC is about science, about the administration of the movement, about networking, and about showcasing the host country. But more than anything, it is about value and values - what we value, and the values we embrace. There is no consumer clamour, anywhere in the world, for pesticided food, for irradiated food, for GMO food, nor for nano-food. The diverse spiritual traditions of the world recognise the sacredness of food. Every parent wants for their child, clean, safe, nutritious, sustaining food. In a world that is not always open, and is sometimes openly hostile, to the organic solution, it is timely to remember that it was primarily values, rather than science or economics, that ridded agriculture of its previous pernicious dependence on slavery, and that the affirmation of values will be a crucial component of the organic movement's continuing quest to rid food production of synthetic pesticides, insecticides and herbicides. Each OWC is an affirmation anew of the values that drive, and that unite, the global organic movement.

The twenty-first century is Asia's century, and Korea's OWC can serve to reinvigorate the momentum of organics in the region. Asia's organic statistics are dominated by the 'organic giants' of China and India. These two countries occupy global leadership positions in the world of organic agriculture. Worldwide, they are the only states that rank in the top ten countries for those two important indices of organics growth: the

increase in organic hectares over the past decade; and the rate of increase of organic agricultural land over the decade (Paull, 2011c).

Korea's Organic World Congress was a milestone for Korea, for Asia, and for the world. It perhaps signals an Asian Spring for organics where Korea, in particular, and Asia, in general, are set to make rapid progress in meeting their aspirations and goals for reclaiming food and agriculture as organic.

References

- King, F. H. (1911a). *Farmers of Forty Centuries, or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan* (Edited by Professor J.P. Bruce). Madison, Wisconsin: Mrs. F. H. King.
- King, F. H. (1911b). *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Organic Farming in China, Korea and Japan* (2004 edition with redacted title). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- KOC. (2011). *Organic is Life, Congress Handbook*. Gyeonggi Paldang: Korea Organizing Committee for the 17th IFOAM OWC (KOC).
- Neuhoff, D., Sohn, S. M., SSekyewa, C., Halberg, N., Rasmussen, I. A., & Hermansen, J. (Eds.). (2011a). *Organic is Life - Knowledge for Tomorrow. Volume 1. Organic Crop Production. Proceedings of the Second Scientific Conference of the International Organic Agriculture Research (ISO FAR), 28 September - 1 October, Namyangju, Korea*. Bonn: ISO FAR.
- Neuhoff, D., Sohn, S. M., SSekyewa, C., Halberg, N., Rasmussen, I. A., & Hermansen, J. (Eds.). (2011b). *Organic is Life - Knowledge for Tomorrow. Volume 2. Socio-Economy, Livestock, Food Quality, Agro-Ecology and Knowledge Dissemination. Proceedings of the Second Scientific Conference of the International Organic Agriculture Research (ISO FAR), 28 September - 1 October, Namyangju, Korea*. Bonn: ISO FAR.
- Paull, J. (2011a). The making of an agricultural classic: *Farmers of Forty Centuries or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan, 1911-2011*. *Agricultural Sciences*, 2(3), 175-180.
- Paull, J. (2011b). A postcard from Korea: World's first organic agriculture museum. *Journal of Bio-Dynamics Tasmania*, 104 (Summer), 11-14.
- Paull, J. (2011c). The uptake of organic agriculture: A decade of worldwide development. *Journal of Social and Development Sciences*, 2(3), 111-120.
- Willer, H. (2012). *Organic World*. Frick: Forschungsinstitut für biologischen Landbau (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture) (FiBL). www.organic-world.net accessed 3 April 2012.
- Willer, H., & Kilcher, L. (Eds.). (2011). *The World of Organic Agriculture: Statistics and Emerging Trends 2011*: Bonn: International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM); Frick, Switzerland: Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL).