

**10<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Agriculture and Rural Development in China: Rural China and its Global Connections, April 8-10, 2011, Aarhus University**

The ECARDC network has been an institution in European Chinese studies hosting biannual conference over the last two decades. These events regularly resulted in cutting-edge publications of edited volumes and special issues of academic journals that were very well received in scholarly circles. Apart from that, it has also been a platform for discussions between academics of various disciplines and practitioners from civil society as well as development agencies interested in agriculture and rural development in China. Given the speed of change of everything related to China the continuity of this vibrant network is remarkable. This anniversary conference was organized by Stig Thøgersen and Ane Bislev at Aarhus University, the location of the first conference more than twenty years ago.

Prasenjit Duara (Singapore National University) opened the conference with a keynote speech on liberalizing reforms and rural society which compared China and India. This provided a welcome comparative perspective and broached a number of important topics that repeatedly surfaced during the following three days. The second day of the conference was again opened by a keynote speech given by Jim Harkness (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy). He addressed the topic of China and global food security starting with Lester Brown's famous thesis on China's increasing demand for food imports and discussing why his predictions in the end did not come to pass. The rest of the conference was organized as parallel panels with almost forty presentations from delegates not only from various European countries, China and Australia. A panel on governance in rural China, organized by Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg) focused on the roles played by different levels of state actors as well as the interactions between them. It demonstrated that these political processes are crucial to our understanding of rural development in China. This discussion tied in nicely with the panel put together by Thøgersen and Bislev on organizing rural China. Here, the intellectual debate on how to organize rural China and the function of this debate for the political process, providing peasants with capital to start businesses as well as peasants' democratic awareness were considered pivotal for rural development in China. Another related subtheme of the conference was proposed by Sascha Klotzbücher (University of Vienna), namely researching and consuming rural China. This panel offered epistemological reflections on the research process itself (especially in collaborative projects with Chinese partners) as well as on images of rurality among TCM practitioners and in contemporary Chinese documentary films.

Other panels took up economic questions like current challenges in China's agricultural sector which range from grain production to farmers' organizations to the adoption of organic food by consumers. An actor-centric focus was adopted by the contributions to the panel on rural microeconomics which elucidated the correlation of family background and the level of income. Furthermore, factors that influence farm household decision-making and the impact of subsidies on village economies were highlighted and widely discussed.

Questions of agricultural trade and global linkages were discussed in two panels, one focusing on competitiveness, impacts and growth, the other on foreign capital and overseas investments in China's agricultural sector. The contributions showed how China's primary sector, despite being less open than its manufacturing industries, is nevertheless increasingly closely connected to world markets and international trends. The transformative nature of this development became visible at a

panel on changing land usage patterns within Chinese agriculture. Here scholars reported on ongoing trend of land transfer and concentration toward commercialized farming structures.

A fruitful approach to connecting and comparing dynamics in different agricultural commodities is a focus on the value chain linking agricultural producers with processing industries and consumers. This was adopted in a panel organized by Louis Augustin-Jean (University of Tsukuba) that examined trends in silk, fine-wool, cashmere, sugar and the dairy industry. The emerging conclusion is that the Chinese state's vision for a "modern" agriculture dominated by large vertically integrated companies that substitute small-holder agriculture may not be feasible or at least will come at high social costs.

A final feature worth of note are two "emerging scholar" panels which gave young researchers the chance to present and discuss their work (in progress) with an international specialist audience. A new generation of students of rural China is taking up institutional and political topics but also societal change and urbanization. With this promising emerging scholarship the future of the field looks bright.

As usual the ECARDC conference was characterized by lively debate and exchange across disciplinary boundaries. The next conference will be held in 2013 at the University of Würzburg in Germany under the preliminary title "Rural China under new leadership".

Björn Alpermann