

# Korea Rediscovered Organic Agriculture

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Asia is going green. Eighty one per cent of South Korea's economic stimulus package consists of green projects. For China the figure is 38%, while for the USA it is only 12% (Bacani, 2009). Meanwhile the green component of Australia's economic stimulus package has been reported as merely "tokenistic" (Evans, 2009, p.2)

The early pioneers of bio-dynamic and organic farming all looked to the East for both evidence and inspiration. As an early agri-tourist, Professor Franklin King spent eight months of 1909 travelling through China, Korea, and Japan (Paull, 2006). King was an acute observer and, fortunate for us, he carefully documented the agricultural practices that he observed in the orient a century ago.

King had had a falling out with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). He was in dispute over the then prevailing USDA dogma of the perpetual fertility of the soil without replenishment. King resigned from the USDA, and his visit to Asia was a knock-on effect of his quest for evidence of sound, rather than exploitative, farming practices.

The tangible outcome of King's agri-tourism was a carefully documented account of Asian farming practices pre-Haber-Bosch synthetic fertiliser and pre-synthetic pesticides. King's book *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, or Permanent

Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan (1911) was republished in the 1920s, the 1930s, the 1940s, and it is still in print.

The earliest pioneers of both bio-dynamic and organic agriculture cited King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries* account of Asian farming practices. These pioneers include Rudolf Steiner (1924), Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1938), Lord Northbourne (1940), Eve Balfour (1943), Jerome Rodale (1945), Australian's Colonel Harold White and Professor Stanton Hicks (1953), and the Howards (1954), all of whom looked eastward.

Korea now appears to be in the process of rediscovering its organic farming heritage. It is making a serious bid for recognition as an organic producer. South Korea has 46 members of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and North Korea has two members; compare this to Australia with just nine members (2009).

Despite a recent Chasers comedy skit on ABC television which displayed to Americans a map of the world with the Australian mainland mislabelled "North Korea", and Tasmania mislabelled "South Korea", in geographic reality, the Korean peninsula is still in the northern hemisphere. It does have a considerable length of coastline, and it shares a northern border with its only contiguous neighbour,

China. North and South Korea, taken together, have an area of 220,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 75 million. That is about the size of Victoria with about 15 times the population; or alternatively, Korea is more than twice the size of Tasmania, with a population 150 times greater.

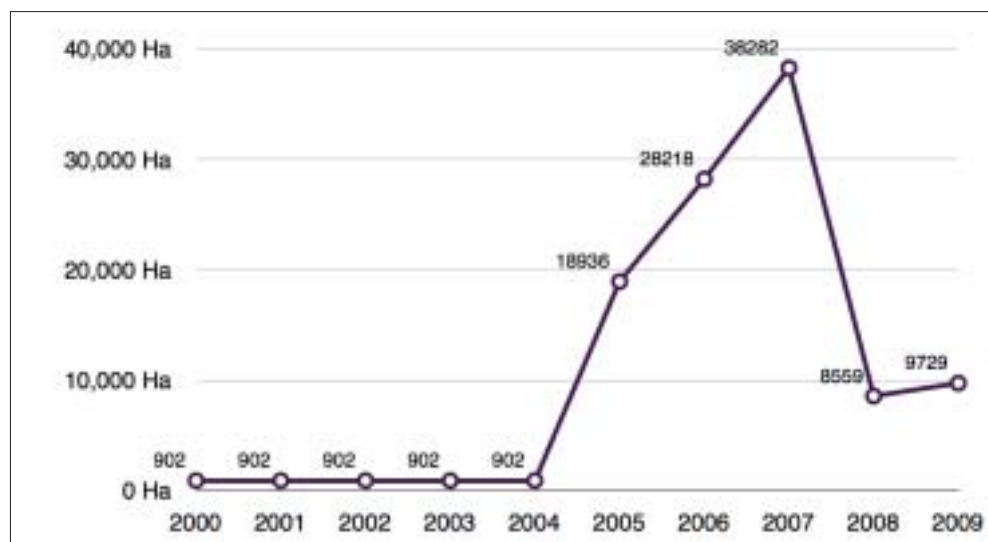
South Korean organic agriculture increased ten-fold from 2004 to 2009 - from a very low base of 902 hectares, to 9729 hectares (see Fig.1). While these are very modest figures, all the indications are that Korea is poised for a significant embrace of organics, and that substantial increases in its organic area, in the immediate future, seem likely. The corresponding figures for North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) are not reported in Willer & Kilcher (2009).

(See Figure 1 below.)

South Korean organic farms/producers increased six-fold in the period 2004 to 2009, from 1237 to 7507 (see Fig.2). As with the organic hectares (Fig.1) there appears to be some substantial fluctuation; this may be an artefact of the data collection and reporting methodology, rather than a "real" peak and subsequent decline. If the 2006 data point is disregarded as unreliable, the data set exhibits a steady increase over the past several years in organic farms/producers in the Republic of Korea.

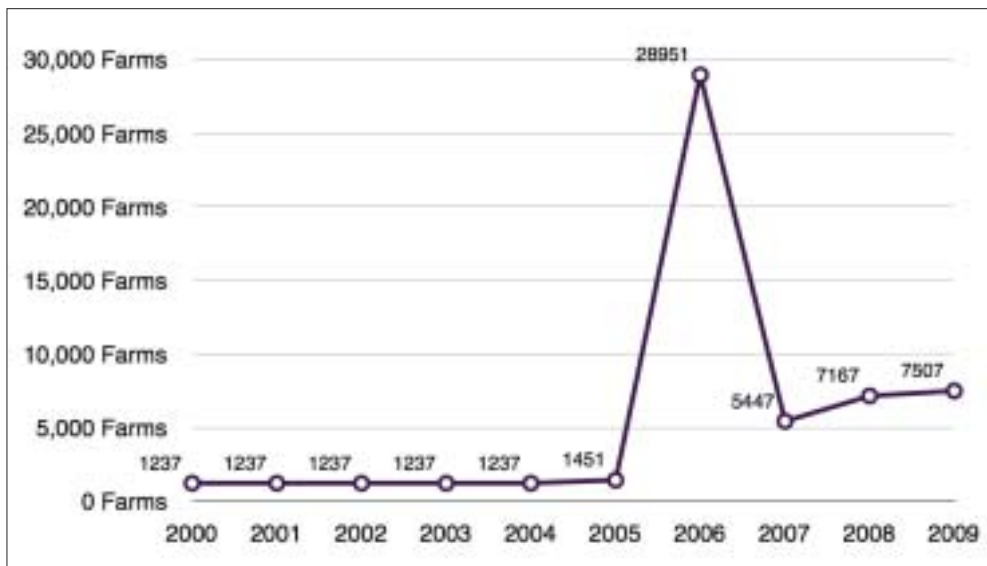
(See Figure 2 on the next page.)

A mark of Korea's new-found commitment to organics is that the next IFOAM Organic World Congress, a triennial event, will be held in Korea in 2011. The Korea Bidding Committee said that an Organic Congress win for Korea would "create ample opportunities to stimulate the organic



**Figure 1: Organic Hectares: a decade of Certified Organic Agriculture in South Korea (Republic of Korea), (hectares are certified organic hectares; dates refer to the year of publication of the data; data sources: The World of Organic Agriculture, IFOAM, 2000 to 2009 (Willer & Kilcher, 2009, and nine prior editions)).**

**Figure 2: Organic Farms/Producers: a decade of Certified Organic Agriculture in South Korea (Republic of Korea), (dates refer to the year of publication of the data; data sources: The World of Organic Agriculture, IFOAM, 2000 to 2009 (Willer & Kilcher, 2009, and nine prior editions)).**



movement in the country”. They declared it would also be an opportunity to display local organic know-how, including: “organic rice agricultural methods such as duck-rice and crab-rice” and the “unique characteristics of Korean rice agriculture” (KBC, 2008, p.1).

When it came time for a vote of IFOAM delegates, the 2011 Organic World Congress heading eastward was a forgone conclusion. There were three competing delegations, each of them from Asia. Korea, Taiwan and Negros Island, the Philippines, were the contenders for the 2011 Organic World Congress. The island of Negros was outgunned and outspent on all fronts. Taiwan and Korea were seriously competitive contenders for the vote in the medieval town of Vignola in Italy. Both these bidders presented well

crafted and budgeted bids, and each attended with an enthusiastic contingent of its own organic advocates.

An Organic World Congress in Asia is described as an “historic event” and a first for Asia (KBC, 2008, p.1). The Korean Bidding Committee declared that the provincial government of Gyeonggi, in the mid-west of South Korea, has committed “funding of 2 billion won” which they stated is “equivalent to US\$2 million” (KBC, 2008, p.3). According to the Bidding Committee, Gyeonggi Province: “is the core of the South Korean agriculture industry. The province has made a strong commitment to decrease the use of chemical fertilizers and agrochemicals in its goal to encourage sustainable agriculture” (KBC, 2008, p.3).

At the presentation of bids in Italy, the

Governor of Gyeonggi Province, Moon Soo Kim, described his vision of making Korea “the world’s most environmentally friendly country by 2011”. He said that “by hosting the event, I hope to contribute to the development of organic farming, both in Korea and around the world. I will do my utmost to ensure the success of this event”.

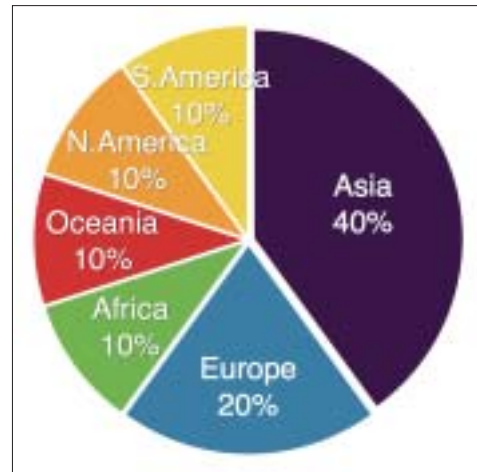
The proposed venue for the next Organic World Congress is the Korean Film Council Studios (KOFIC) in Namyangju, 20 kilometres from the capital, Seoul. The bidding committee claimed that KOFIC is the largest complex of its kind in Asia and advised that KOFIC includes accommodation, seminar rooms and restaurants - as well as film sets and studios.

From a Namyangju-based Organic Congress, the Korean organisers promised visitors options of three to five day tours of organic farms. They outlined that delegates in 2011 could choose a tour of local organic farms in South Korea, or of both North and South Korea “including the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)”. Two broader touring choices will be visits to organic facilities in Korea and Japan, or facilities in Korea and China (KBC, 2008, p.4-5).

(See Figure 3.)

The 2008 General Assembly of IFOAM in Italy, also witnessed a shift to the East. The new IFOAM World Board includes four board members from Asia, which I believe is a record. These Asian-domiciled members are from India, Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines. Europe achieved two delegates, Australia one (see Fig.3).

**Figure 3: A shift to the East: Geographic domiciles of 2008-elected IFOAM World Board members.**



Although IFOAM World Board members ostensibly act for the organic sector, rather than for a geographic region, it would, nevertheless, be naive to dismiss the seismic significance of this geographic shift to the East.

An Organic World Congress in Korea will present the latest thinking and developments in the organic sector, and the location promises to be an eye-opener as well as a taste-bud treat for delegates. Korea’s 17th IFOAM Organic World Congress has the theme “Toward an Environmentally Benign Community”, and the dates announced are 27 September to 5 October, 2011.

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