

# China says 'no' to genetically engineered rice

Feature story - January 31, 2012

**It took seven years, teams of young campaigners and hordes of devoted supporters, but September 2011 the Chinese government finally said it was suspending the commercialisation of genetically-engineered (GE) rice.**



[See the full story in Greenpeace East Asia's online magazine.](#)

The origins of rice cultivation can be traced to the valleys of China's Yangtze River, with some estimates putting it at over 7,000 years ago. In that time, rice has become an integral part of Chinese life and culture. It dictates the lives of millions of farmers in the Chinese countryside, feeds over a billion Chinese citizens each year and is synonymous with Chinese cuisine and culture. And Yunnan, in southwestern China is where much of this rice originates from.

Back in 2004, the GE rice campaign was one of the first campaigns for our new team in mainland China. Campaign Director of Greenpeace East Asia, Sze Pang Cheung, remembers those early days with a smile. "We launched the campaign with a five-day bus tour of Guangzhou," he says. "Actually it was more like a van than a bus, and it wasn't even ours. We borrowed it from another environmental NGO."

In October 2004, Sze Pang Cheung and his team headed to Yunnan where many of the locals employ traditional sustainable farming methods. They provided cameras so that the [locals could record their rice lives](#) including ["duck-rice" farming](#) where ducks paddle about the flooded rice paddies, eating up pests and fertilizing fields with their manure. Duck-rice farming has been around for 2,000 years.

The tour was such a success that the cameras were lent out for an extended period of a year and a beautiful book was made to record the images. But just as they were about to head south, the team got some bad news; Chinese scientists had applied to commercialise four varieties of Chinese GE rice. While the scientists' move didn't mean that GE rice would be commercialized any time soon, it was a major step towards commercialization.



Rice dictates the lives of millions of farmers in the Chinese countryside, feeds over a billion Chinese citizens each year and is synonymous with Chinese cuisine and culture. And Yunnan, in southwestern China is where much of this rice originates from. There was no doubt about it - this was a critical fight. So when the team got back from the duck-rice fields, they devoted themselves to the campaign. First they unraveled the complex web of players involved in the push for commercialization.

"For a scientist to have a high level of credibility they need to be separated

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from approval bodies and industry. But in China, GE scientists are such a close knit gang that the people sitting on approval boards for research money, biosafety boards that approve product safety, the scientists at public research institutes, and those at biotech companies who plan to produce and profit from GE rice are either one and the same, or closely connected," explains Sze Pang Cheung.

We leaked their findings to the press. The web of deceit was published in the Southern Weekend, a Guangdong-based newspaper. "After that story came out the GE rice scientists and experts were inundated with so many calls they appear to have shut their phones down for three months," says Sze Pang Cheung.

Swiss-born Isabelle Meister was a veteran campaigner by the time she joined the China team in 2005. "It's easier to attack a corporation for their dirty methods or products," she muses. "But what do you do when the bad guys are scientists in publicly-funded institutes or sitting on a government board? Scientists should be neutral. They shouldn't be the ones you want to attack. So this was a big shock to me."

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Isabelle decided to use a campaign method with Chinese characteristics: China is a country where money talks, patriotism is prevalent and people take their food seriously. So the campaign focused on GE rice was a threat to food sovereignty. Multi-national companies – not Chinese farmers – stand to profit from the commercialization of GE rice from investments in technology and patents.

By the end of 2009 it looked all but inevitable that rice produced in China would be predominantly genetically engineered. Long after the fact, the Chinese government announced that a [secret multi-ministerial meeting had passed two GE rice lines](#) – even though they had not received biosafety certificates at the time.

Chinese politicians began raising doubts over genetic engineering, followed by a string of Chinese celebrities including Mao Zedong's daughter, and the father of China's hybrid rice, Yuan Longping. Several Chinese scholars signed a petition urging caution on GE rice and submitted it to the Parliament.

"The pressure on the Ministry of Agriculture was so high it was actually forced to announce that no approval of GE rice had been given and that GE rice remains illegal," says Isabelle.

The time was ripe for us to begin a large-scale anti-GE rice campaign. The team exposed American retail giant Walmart for selling GE rice in China and filed a legal case against it. The team distributed a GE shopper's guide to half a million Chinese consumers through mobile and Internet services. [Chinese consumers joined the campaign](#), ringing up companies and demanding they go non-GE.

Greenpeace campaigner Lorena Luo will never forget one reader who was so dedicated that she voluntarily checked all her favorite food brands at her local supermarket against our shopper's guide. The woman then called red listed brands and told them that as a consumer she would like them to become non-GE. She showed a kind of persistence that would match any of our in-house campaigners.

GE rice was big news: TV, magazines, newspapers and online media joined the debate. Isabelle urged her team to get companies to make non-GE pledges. Two huge corporations, Cofco and Yihai Kerry readily obliged and [a string of supermarkets also pledged not to use GE ingredients](#) in their own brands and with their fresh unpacked fruits, vegetables and grains.

And then, in September 2011, came the big news we had all been waiting for. China's major financial weekly, the Economic Observer quoted an information source close to the Ministry of Agriculture saying that China had suspended the commercialisation of GE rice.

While the fight is not yet over, we still need the Chinese government to reassess its GE investments and focus on sustainable agriculture, there is no doubt that our seven-year GE rice campaign has been a success.

Thanks to our members, activists, mothers, supportive scientists, volunteers and concerned citizens, we took on Goliath and won!