

## **Milking It for All It's Worth**

Jina Kim, 4/8/2003

The milk industry in China is growing, thanks to the government's support for schoolchildren to drink a glass a day. As the dairy demand grows, government and corporation also press toward development in the northern border region of China, where most milk production occurs. According to David Barboza from the *New York Times*, China's northern region may become its "new milk belt" (4/8/2001, C1, "China's New Milk Belt, This Country's Answer to Wisconsin").

Currently, Chinese dairy production methods are primitive compared to Western standards. In Hohhot, dubbed the Milk City, small dairy farmers keep four or five cows chained to a post. Cows are just fed food scraps, which is unfit for better milk production. Compared to the average American cow that yields 17,600 pounds of milk per year, a Chinese cow is far behind with less than 8,800 pounds.

Wang Ergo is a typical Chinese dairy farmer. He built a dairy farm in the courtyard of his home, and his run-down, makeshift barns are located on the 20-by-20 foot property. Wang owns four cows, with one chained to a green Jeep. He is optimistic about the milk industry in China and hopes the boom will continue for his son's dairy career.

To keep pace with the milk demand, the government and businesses are taking control of the rising industry. Concerns on overgrazing have compelled government restrictions and fence in properties. The Chinese government is also looking to improve cow genetics. Yili Corporation and Mengnui Dairy, two of the biggest dairies, are based in Hohhot. Yili is installing milking stations in small villages and offering loans to small farmer who want to increase production.

It will be interesting to observe the evolution of Hohhot and other dairy cities in China. I question whether these rapid developments will help the small farmer in the end. New technologies will be introduced, but will the farmers accept them? Or, will large dairy farmers dominate because the industry is more profitable now? Will the original residents' ways of life even survive?

In the short term at least, the small farmers are excited about the milk boom. They are interested in enlarging farms and learning new techniques from foreign experts, who are being flown in to train farmers. They no longer milk cows by hand. In gertu, a 4,000-member village, farmers take their cows to Babai Village Station No. 2, an automated milking post installed by a dairy company. Before this new technology, the farmers milked three tons of milk by hand everyday.

If China's dairy industry develops similarly to the American model, the small farmer will have no place in the new milk age. According to Barboza, "bigger dairy farms [are] on the way... visitors can see the new developments coming in the rows and row of bricks" (4/8/2003, C1). Industrialization demands efficiency, which most likely be achieved by large-scale production and advanced technology.

Or perhaps, milk demand will not grow as high in China as it is in the United States. Then, the industry's growth may halt at a point when small farmers are well paid for their milk and demand is filled. Also, if the small farmers adapt to new technology, there will be a greater chance for them to exist in the market.

In China, society's demand led to an industry's growth, which propelled government and business intervention. How will the consumers' later wishes affect the outcome of milk production in China? Will the industry become solely based on mass

production? Are large-scale farms inevitable results of new technology, or will advanced methods allow small farmers to co-exist successfully with the larger farms? The future of China's milk industry will be a worthwhile study in modern industrialization.