



Robert Joseph, author of The Wines of France, is currently working on a study of the future of the global wine industry.

THE WINE DRAGON

Everyone reading this will, I imagine, have their own views on the reaction of the Chinese authorities to the current protests in Tibet - and indeed to the manifestation of most other forms of dissent. They may also have formed a few personal impressions on the global environmental impact of China's twenty-first century industrial revolution. But no one who takes a closer look at what is happening within China today, can deny the achievements of the old men who run this enormous country, in overcoming the devastating national famine with which it was (largely self-) afflicted as recently as the 1960s.

When Deng Xiaoping, the man who was both responsible for the harsh reaction of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and for launching China's economic reform, was asked about his greatest concern when he woke every morning, his response was simple: he worried about how to feed 1.3b people. After setting in motion a huge increase in grain production that turned China into the world's second biggest largest grower of corn, Deng and his successors considered how that grain would be used. At present, some of it is being transformed into biofuels, which are already being produced in sufficient quantities for some to be exported to the US. But diversion of foodstuff for fuel is, according to an article last year by Sunny Lee in Asia Times, already proving controversial. Ms Lee quotes an unnamed Chinese scientist as saying that "Arguments have never ceased in the Chinese science community on biofuel" and, at a local level, "people... worry about food security". The prospect of vast swathes of previously partly tree-covered land now being given over to bushes has inevitably led to fears of environmental disaster, but it will leave more food on the table.

Which brings us neatly to the fact that while the rest of the world has been looking elsewhere, China has quietly become the sixth biggest wine producer on the planet. This, like the recent removal of wine duty in Hong Kong (a local move, but one that would certainly have been sanctioned by Beijing) is far from accidental. The decision was made in the early 1980s at the highest level to promote the production and consumption of wine. The reasoning was wonderfully simple: every time any Chinese man or woman downs a glass of beer, whisky, gin, vodka or rice wine, there's a lot of invaluable carbohydrate that's not going to line their own, or their compatriots' bellies. Wine, on the other hand, is made from stuff that does not form part of a staple diet.

So far, those recently planted vines are not yielding many wines that are likely to worry winemakers elsewhere. Indeed, many of the best supposedly 'Chinese' examples still bear - to use Jancis Robinson's neatly chosen term - an 'eerie' resemblance to the kinds of wines that are known to be shipped into China for blending. Winemaking training still leaves room for improvement, as does viticulture training, but outside assistance is increasingly evident, from the recently arrived Australian winemaker at Grace Vineyards (undeniably one of the very best producers at present) to the Noble Dragon wine being made with the help of Austrian winemaker Lenz Moser at Chateau Changyu. Interestingly, Changyu, which was founded way back in 1892, openly harbours ambitions to become one of the world's ten biggest wine companies sometime this year.

If China's steady evolution into a serious wine producing nation is fueled by government benevolence (duty rates are low) and the aspirations of many of its producers, there's another reason to take China seriously. At the recent World Conference on Global Warming and Wine in Barcelona, Dr Richard Smart revealed that one of the areas that may fare better in a changed climate is the so-far barely exploited Heibei province to the north west of both Beijing and Shandong, a region that was previously regarded as one of China's best.

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