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## Food fears

Source: Global Times [08:46 February 23 2011]

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**Scientists at the Changchun Academy of Agricultural Sciences conduct experiments on GM food. Some experts say GM food could pose health risks. Photo: CFP**

**By Zhang Han**

For the past few weekends, Yi Xiaowu, a 40-year-old IT professional in Shanghai, has been busy looking for a piece of farmland where he can grow food for his family.

Of course, he could just buy the food from the supermarket. But after concerns over food safety prompted him last year to buy organic products from farmers, he recently opted to go one step further and plant his own food.

"I'm worried about the safety of the rice that is sold in supermarkets, because I heard that some genetically modified rice is sold there without being labeled. I believe it is quite risky to eat this as a staple food," he told the Global Times.

Genetically modified technology has been widely used in agriculture for years, and the safety issues surrounding it have been debated for just as long.

Some experts believe that GM food is potentially harmful to people's health.

The debate intensified in December 2009, when China authorized safety certificates for two types of GM crops.

Although the country has not yet approved the commercialization of GM rice, certain foods that carry a potential risk have been in the market for years, according to some reports.

"It worried me so much that I started to buy food from an organic farm last year, and established a group for people who had the same worries," the father of a six-year-old boy said.

His group, the "Shanghai healthy food-purchasing group," has already attracted more than 40 members.

"Most of the members are people like me, who are in their 30s or 40s and concerned about the health of the children and the elderly in the family," Yi said.

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### A tough sell

The Ministry of Agriculture issued an announcement Sunday calling for public education on GM technology to be strengthened, and for the fostering of a "good public opinion for the healthy development of GM technology in agriculture."

The country has also slated 20 billion yuan (\$2.93 billion) on developing GM technologies between 2008 and 2020, people.com.cn reported earlier.

However, like Yi, many people lack confidence in GM food. A survey released by Greenpeace China Tuesday revealed that 60 percent of 1,000 Chinese consumers polled in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan and Changsha are worried about the potential health risks it brings.

Nearly 70 percent of the consumers specifically opt for non-GM rice, while up to 65 percent of the respondents said they want the government to include their opinions when making any decision on the issue.

"This attitude is not difficult to understand," said Fang Lifeng, director of food and agricultural projects at Greenpeace China. "Food safety is a concern for anyone, not just 1.3 billion people who eat it every day as a staple."

Huang Dafang, former director of the Biotechnology Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Beijing, said in March that growing GM food was the only way for China to meet the growing food demand of its people.

Huang said GM paddy rice is expected to be available in the market in about three to five years, and rejected suggestions by four delegates to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that the commercialization of GM foods should be slowed down.

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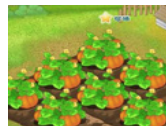
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### Safety issues

However, other experts warned that GM food is dangerous for the country.

Gu Xiulin, a biochemist who has opposed the GM project for years, told the Global Times that despite public rejection, GM rice has been illegally and secretly cultivated in many parts of China for several years.

According to a Greenpeace China report last year, GM rice had been discovered in farmlands in Hubei, Hunan, Fujian and Jiangxi provinces. GM rice products had also been found in the supermarkets and grocery stores of various provinces without consumers knowing about it.

"Since GM rice reached the market so easily, no one knows where else it could go," Gu told the Global Times, adding that some government agencies had turned a blind eye to the practice for a long time.

Fang from Greenpeace China said even though biosafety regulations for GM crops have been in place since 1996, implementation has not been effective.

"The global debate over the risk of GM food is still quite intense," Jiang Gaoming, the chief researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Botany, told the Global Times. "However, Chinese farmers, bioethicists and environmental groups are not being involved in the biosafety evaluation process."

Gu said that potential risks could result in a huge tragedy.

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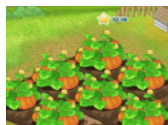
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"Before the large scale plant of GM rice is implemented, the public should all stand up to stop a tragedy that could strike everyone," Gu said.

Some Chinese food companies and supermarkets have promised not to go down the GM path.

China National Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Corporation, the country's largest food import and export company and food manufacturer, said last year that various brands of rice the company sold are non-GM.

Companies that are indirectly related to the rice industry, such as baby food manufacturer Heinz and some beer producers, have promised not to use GM rice as raw materials.

Retailers such as Wal-Mart, Carrefour, as well as other China-based supermarkets and grocery stores, have all promised not to sell GM rice.

"The attitude of food companies and retailers also reflects consumer rejection of GM food. So far, 76 companies and nine supermarkets have made a public commitment to non-GM food. This strong and clear attitude need to be part of China's formulation of the relevant policies," Fang said.

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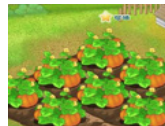
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