

Like them or not, 'China needs GMOs'

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China has a fifth of the world's people, but only about 7 percent of its arable land. Food security is a national obsession—so it only seemed natural when, earlier this month, state-owned ChemChina announced its bid to buy the pesticide- and seed-producing giant Syngenta. . . Technology, the Party seemed to say, and especially genetically modified crops, are the key to a sustainable future.

There's just one problem: Most Chinese hate GMOs.

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A history of food scandals make Chinese consumers especially wary of technology in the grocery.

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Whether consumers realize it or not, China is already dependent on GM crops. The country imports 5 million tons of Gm corn and much more soybeans each year. "It's mostly used for vegetable oil and animal feed," says [says Carl Pray, an economist at Rutgers.]. "But it's being consumed."

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Syngenta might also find a regulatory loophole in the powerful gene-editing technique Crispr. In China, GMOs are legally defined as "something to which you add DNA." . . . But with Crispr, researchers can create a specific mutation by snipping with Crispr's genetic scissors. . . . Given China's rapid uptake of Crispr in even more ethically-fraught human biology experiments, the technology might finally help change the image of GMOs from contaminant to enhanced.

So how long before Chinese citizens rich and poor are eating their GM broccoli, in one form or another? "I would think within 10 years," says Pray.

"Five years," says [Caixia Gao, a plant geneticist at the Institute of Genetics and Developmental Biology.]

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