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CHINA'S RURAL DEVELOPMENT MIRACLE

WITH INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT OF AGRICULTURAL MARKETING IN CHINA

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Since 1979 China has extended the household responsibility system with a view to relaxing the control of direct planning by the government over production in rural areas. At the same time efforts have been made to reform the marketing systems for agricultural products. The aim of both the production and marketing reforms has been to transform the old systematic rigid planning system into a socialist planned market economy. The implementing of the household responsibility system has run rather smoothly. The new system had been popularized throughout the country by the end of 1982. On the other hand, the marketing reforms have experienced many twists and turns, especially after 1985. The main objective of this paper is to outline what has happened in the course of these marketing reforms. Some brief comments on future prospects are presented at the end of the paper.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the period 1953–1986, China has experienced three stages in the development of marketing systems for agricultural products.

Stage I (1953–1978)

The first stage was an era of steadily strengthening the centrally planned trading system. China began enforcing a system of state planning for food grain in 1953 in the form of compulsory delivery quotas. Thereafter, more and more agricultural products were subjected to various forms and degrees of government control. At the end of the 1950s, a comprehensive planned trading system completely superseded the open market system. The main characteristics of the planned trading system were fixed or variable delivery quotas for agricultural products. These quotas had to be delivered to the government at much lower prices than the free market price (or black market price). Both the quotas and the prices were set by the government annually or every three years.

The dominating theoretical basis for the heavy levy or tax on agriculture by way of these low delivery prices was the priority given to heavy industry in economic transformation. Empirical studies have shown that the main impacts of

the planned trading system, in combination with the production targets system, were a depression of the farmers' incentives for production and resource allocation inefficiency. These policies led to the downward trend in productivity in agriculture between 1953 and 1978 and impeded rather than promoted economic transformation.

Stage II (1979 – 1984)

The second stage involved the gradual change from a rigid centrally planned system of marketing to a socialist planned market system. In these six years the government: (a) reduced the number of commodities under state procurement by quota from 180 to 21; (b) lessened the control over commodities that remained under state procurement [even the 'first category' crops (grain, cotton and oil-seeds) can now be freely sold and bought in the open market after fulfilling the state quota]; (c) reduced the quantity (quota) for delivery at low prices [e.g. the actual amount of grain delivered (at low prices) in 1981 was only 64% of what was delivered in 1978]; (d) raised the prices paid for procurement quotas for agricultural products; (e) established thousands of open markets in the countryside and the cities. The main effects of these reforms were to stimulate agricultural production and to allow a more rational production structure to emerge. The result has been an enlarged market supply of foods and increased incomes for the farmers.

Stage III (1985 – 1986)

This stage was marked by the policy decision to move towards the complete elimination of state monopoly trading in agricultural markets. The old system was to be replaced by the 'socialist planned market system' if not immediately then at least as a policy goal. In the early days of 1985 the central authority announced the gradual abolition of the compulsory procurement quota system and the initiation of the socialist planned market system for all agricultural products. It was a decisive step in the name of marketing reform in China.

The likely effects of the new system have been hotly debated among policy makers and economists. My view is that we should wait and see for several years. Perhaps it would be helpful to mention a few figures which give some idea of the effect the reforms have had on output. In 1985 red meat production increased 14.3% compared with 1984, fruits 18.2%, aquatic products 13.9%. The supply of non-grain foodstuffs including meat, poultry, eggs, fruits, vegetables, aquatic products and oil-seeds increased 12% on average per year between 1984 and 1986. This can be compared to an average increase of 7.3% per year in 1980–1983. The farmers' cash income from non-grain commodities increased 22.5% in 1985 compared with 1984. In regard to the drop in grain production in 1985 and 1986, the main causes were the depressed 'contract price' for grain, the decreased supply and rapidly rising price of industrial inputs such as fertilizer, and the changeable weather conditions in these two years. For example, in 1985 the contract price for grain was 28% lower than the 'negotiated price' and much lower than the free market price. In contrast to the 'falling off' of grain prices, the prices for chemical fertilizers were 43% higher in 1985 than 1983, pesticide prices were up 82.8% and farm machinery prices rose 92.1%. For city residents, the expenditure on food accounted for 58.6% of their total expenditure in 1981,

59.6% in 1984 and 55.5% in 1986. Their expenditure on grain was 12.9%, 11.3% and 7.8% of the total expenditure in 1981, 1984 and 1986 respectively. According to Engel's law, it seems that not only the farmers but also the city dwellers were better off in 1985/86 under the new system.

THE MAIN FEATURES OF AGRICULTURAL MARKETING IN CHINA TODAY

The economic transformation of China from an underdeveloped to a developed economy and the transformation of traditional agriculture to a modern agriculture must proceed side-by-side. Reform of the agricultural production and marketing systems is, therefore, just one component of overall economic and political reform.

Co-existence of planned market and open market systems

Since 1985, two staple crops, grain and cotton, have remained on a national contract procurement system and at the same time the national government has maintained the system of grain rationing for city residents. Both the amount and price of the 'contract' are unilaterally decided by the government with the price being somewhat lower than that in the open market. The ration price to city residents is lower than the procurement price. After fulfilment of the contract or procurement obligations, farmers are permitted to trade grain in the open market. Grain and cotton markets, therefore, still remain subject to a system of unified central planning as was the case under the old compulsory quota procurement system. Under both arrangements the lower returns to the farmers depressed the farmers' enthusiasm for production. At the same time the differential prices place a heavy burden on government finances for subsidies on staple foods to city residents, mainly as a form of compensation for the low pay of wage earners. In this respect, China is still in the same dilemma as before 1985.

Almost all agricultural products, except grain and cotton, are exchanged in open markets which are subject to various forms and degrees of local government interference. The main forms of interference are selling and buying in large quantities, price ceilings, changing the amount and price of goods which are permitted to be imported and exported to and from other regions or abroad, and trade embargoes.

One of the main forms of interference is through the enormous state commercial network and the collective supply and marketing cooperatives which are under the direct control of the government. The state commercial agents operate mainly on the orders of administrative officials without assuming any responsibility for profits or losses, to a large extent just as they have done for the past thirty years. In general, government control over the open market is strongest in the big cities, weaker in medium and small cities and there is much less interference in the vast countryside. The measures, degrees and forms of interference differ in different districts. For example, in 1985 in Shanghai about 85% of the egg market was controlled by the municipal government in comparison with around 50% of the vegetable market, 38% of the poultry market and there was much looser control over aquatic products.

We can see that in relation to agricultural marketing in present day China, the market mechanism and government interference interact with each other. Under such situations, one of the main features is price uncertainty. In addition to the usual causes of price uncertainty for agricultural products in most developing countries, in China the farmers are also unable to predict the measures and forms of government interference, especially in relation to compulsory decisions. Price uncertainty compounds output uncertainty and leads to big fluctuations in income. Hence, farmers must take great risks when they produce for the market and the necessary premium is often reflected in a higher price than normal. Maybe this factor is one reason for rising food prices in the last three years.

Restructuring state commercial agents and collective supply and marketing cooperatives and the growth in private merchants and voluntary cooperatives

The state commercial agencies were, and in varying degrees still are, operated on an administrative basis rather than on business principles. The collective cooperatives are, to a considerable degree, the same as state commercial agencies in nature, only they specialize in trading with farmers (i.e. procuring agricultural products from, and supplying producer and consumer goods to farmers). Under such a system, there are many inherent shortcomings, especially those of doing things in a bureaucratic way and suffering serious inefficiency. The central authority of China has decided that the cooperatives must be restructured, that is, transformed from administrative agencies into a truly business network. According to the restructuring objectives, every level of each state commercial agency or collective cooperative should be an independent accounting unit responsible for its own profits and losses. They should stand on their own feet without government subsidy and without administrative power and they should compete with private merchants in the open markets which develop with the transformation of the rigid socialist planned economy into the socialist planned market economy.

This restructuring process has been going on for several years with many of the necessary steps already taken by the government. These include decentralizing decision-making power, introducing a bonus system, and establishing various forms of the responsibility system (such as the introduction of contractual arrangements which make the manager responsible for a certain amount of profit, and the leasing of grassroot stores to people or companies who would like to take charge of such an operation under certain conditions etc.). China has experienced some success and suffered some setbacks following these changes. It seems that things are sometimes proceeding too fast and, at other times, too slowly.

In the course of restructuring the marketing sector, in order to push things forward, policy makers have to face a lot of conflict. This includes conflict between the responsibility system and macro-economic planning by an administration inexperienced in coping with the market mechanism, conflict between doing what people are in the habit of doing with their own limited resources and hiring additional labour and other resources according to need, and conflict between egalitarianism and payment according to work done. Egalitarianism has become so deeply rooted in social life that many argue that even the newly introduced bonus should be distributed in an egalitarian way. Things are much more

complicated than was the case with reform of the agricultural production systems. The responsibility system is much more difficult to implement in the marketing system.

To sum up, we have confronted three areas of conflict. First, restructuring would eventually and theoretically benefit all the people and the whole country but at the moment, in the course of restructuring, there exists conflict between gainers and losers which results from the adjustment of economic relationships among the various groups concerned. Second, conflict between traditional ways of life formed over thousands of years, as well as ways of life formed in the last thirty years, and the new approach. Third, conflict among people with different ideologies. These three areas of conflict are mingled with each other. All these conflicts are eventually rooted in the contradiction between state ownership of property and the market economy. There is the vital problem of how to define the optimal mix between public and private initiative and responsibility which will best use the resources available and will give the strongest economic growth with a reasonable distribution of income.

During the period 1953–1978, private merchants disappeared in China. It was illegal for private merchants to participate in farmers' markets in the countryside. During the second half of the period known as the 'Cultural Revolution' even these farmers' markets were closed. Only after 1979 did some farmers begin to trade in agricultural products occasionally or seasonally as a sideline. In 1983 the State Council issued a regulation on open markets in cities and rural areas, lifting the ban on private trade. In 1984 there were about seven million certified private merchant units with more than ten million employees in rural areas. Since then the number of private merchants has been growing steadily. At the same time, farmers have set up marketing cooperatives voluntarily and spontaneously. Generally speaking, the private merchants have operated actively and efficiently and have contributed to the flourishing of the rural economy and the national economy in the last few years. One of the main problems at present is how to reconcile government monitoring of the market and the initiative and reasonable development of private merchants. This is by no means an easy task, given the ideological problems involved.

The scattered and isolated markets in the countryside are growing gradually into regional market systems and further into an unified nationwide market, as well as entering gradually into the international market

In the last few years, rural markets have been growing rapidly. The official or quasi-official commerce and service agencies increased more than fourfold in the period 1978 to 1983. Procurement of agricultural products grew 10.3% annually on average over this period. At the same time there was a rapid growth of open markets with more than ten million people engaged in private commercial activities. A vast number of farmers also participated in the free market economy.

However, the progress of the open markets should not be exaggerated or viewed too optimistically. There are various obstacles on the road ahead. One of the main problems is the shortage of physical infrastructures, such as roads, transportation, packaging, processing, warehouses and market buildings etc. For example, there were only 2.5 km of roads per hundred square kilometres in rural China in 1983 and these roads were mostly unpaved and ungraded. A large part

of the road network, especially that of better quality, is in eastern China. Good roads are quite scarce in inner and western China. The main method by which agricultural products were delivered was by tractor, which accounted for 58.8% of total tonnage transported in the rural areas in 1983. Trucks accounted for only 14.3%.

The shortage of adequate institutions and administrative ability is even more serious than the shortage of physical infrastructure. For example, commodity standardization, market information systems, various public services such as the necessary marketing regulations and arrangements, are almost completely nonexistent. There is a paucity of institutions for, and experience with marketing in general, but the special skills required to assist the transformation from rigid planning to an open market are extremely scarce. There are enormous economic, political and ideological obstacles to progress in this regard.

In 1983–1984, one of the major problems was the so-called ‘difficult to sell grain’, ‘difficult to sell pork’ and the general difficulty farmers had selling various farm products all over China. It was ironic that, while farmers had great difficulty selling feedgrain and pork throughout the year in the countryside, there were shortages in supply and abnormally high prices for pork in most cities, especially big cities. It has been effectively proved that the source of the ‘difficulty’ was not that China had produced too much grain and pork in relation to demand as a whole—the cause of the problem really lay with the lack of marketing facilities, with the inability of many villages to gain access to transportation facilities, and with the rigid administrative restrictions placed on marketing. These difficulties depressed the incentives for farmers and grain output dropped 7% in 1985.

The recent experiences emphasize that improving marketing facilities and reinforcing marketing reform are two of the critical problems in China today. It would help to raise agricultural production, to increase consumer satisfaction and to provide more employment opportunities for under-utilized labour in rural areas in nonfarm activities. Furthermore, incomplete markets are one of the main barriers to specialization. However, building marketing infrastructure will require vast investment, and China is short of capital. It will not be easy to overcome this problem in a short time. Perhaps one of the ways to speed up the construction of infrastructure, such as the building of roads, is to make use of the vast amount of surplus labour in remote rural areas by setting up public works projects.

Improving the environment of agricultural marketing

Agricultural marketing is closely interconnected with agricultural production, patterns of consumption, the credit and finance system and the national economy as a whole. The growth of markets is generally associated with the pace of economic development. It is impracticable to expect a complete marketing system in a developing country such as China. In this respect, China is more or less similar to other developing countries. The unique feature in China is the recent marketing reform. As one element of the whole economic and political reform, marketing reform should be in step with reform in other sectors. It is evident that delays in implementing reforms in at least three other areas have affected, to some degree, the rate of progress with agricultural marketing reform.

First, there has been a slowdown in adjustments to the household responsibility system in agricultural production. This has taken the pressure off the need for better marketing systems in the last few years. For example, in eastern China (mainly the coastal region) about 30–50% of labourers in rural areas have been moved out of agricultural activities, but the necessary adjustment in the responsibility system in terms of proper land use and farm size has not yet been achieved, at least not in any systematic manner. As a result, the rate of increase in agricultural output has declined and the pressure on specialization, and hence market growth, has also decreased.

Second, the pace of economic reform in urban areas has lagged in relation to the pace of rural marketing reform and this has slowed the pace of marketing reform in general. It is obvious that agricultural marketing reform itself is an element of urban reform.

Third, a lag in the reform of the financial system has seriously affected marketing reform. For example, in the early spring of 1985, the price of grain for 'contract delivery' announced by the government was a little higher than that in the open market. That means it was intended to be a supporting price. But the uncontrolled inflation gradually raised the price level while the contract grain price was at a standstill. Therefore, what was a supporting price in spring became a punishing price in autumn in the same year as well as in the following year. In 1986 grain output showed a moderate increase compared with 1985, but by the end of 1986 the free market grain prices had risen more than 10% relative to the end of 1985. Inflation and the increased buying power of consumers from about the end of 1984 have strongly affected agriculture markets. As the price of farm commodities is a sensitive area in the daily life of the population it would not be surprising to find that agricultural markets become one of the most important problems of concern to nearly every stratum of the population, urban or rural. Already farm prices have been one of the topics most heatedly debated in public circles. Under such circumstances it is only natural to ponder the problems of agricultural marketing and see what can be done.

A TENTATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE SOCIALIST PLANNED MARKET ECONOMY AS AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM

The current economic system in China, known as the socialist planned market economy, has features which make it unique in human history. Neither Marxist nor non-Marxist economists have analysed such a system. In recent years there has been a lot of debate in China over how to define the new system. Chinese economists have different views on the matter.

The key element is how we comprehend (government) planning. I believe planning is the setting of macro-economic policy in the long run within a market economy, not just the simple revision of the planned economy which has traditionally prevailed in China. Nor is the present system a simple modification of the free market economy as defined by Adam Smith more than 200 years ago. In China today planning by the central authority should serve as the direct overall design which reconciles the different sectors and all the aspects of the national economy as a whole. The open market should operate so that state commercial agencies, cooperative commercial ventures and private merchants can all compete on equal terms without any discrimination. In order to accomplish

the strategic targets of planning, the government should interfere in the open market basically by economic measures, such as fiscal policy and monetary policy. It should avoid direct administrative orders or any government direct control over the market.

In the course of the transformation from the old fully planned economy to the new socialist planned market economy, it may be necessary for the government to make use of state commercial agencies, especially at the wholesale market level. For example, the state grain trading agencies can help to stabilize the market prices by holding a buffer stock. The Guang-zhou Municipal Government has been doing this since 1985. These state trading agencies which operate at the wholesale level should be independent firms with separate accounting records even though they are tools of government policy.

From an historical viewpoint, the recent economic reforms in China are a revolutionary transformation. The content of this transformation is extremely complex. It includes property ownership reform and political reform as well as market reform. China is travelling down a long road with many twists and turns ahead. The only way to continue the journey is to persist with reform with unswerving determination.

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