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Thai Rice Competitiveness Development in Anticipating Export Market to Chinese

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Abstract:

Up to now Thailand is still the main player on the rice export market. However, others competitors thrive to gain the advantage in rice export to Chinese export market. Therefore, the main objectives of this study is to reveal the competitiveness advantage of Thai rice export, particularly to find path way of its development base on the exporter and regulator perspectives. The qualitative method was applied to address the research objectives. There were three participants involved in this study, namely 2 participants from rice exporter and one participant from government. The thematic analysis was employed to analyze the in-depth interview result.

This study found that several problems emerge on Thai rice production, such as cost, payment and rice distribution at destination country. At the destination country, Thai rice has been mix with the low quality local rice, in this way the original quality is corrupted. In addition, the weak contribution from government may also give impact to Thai rice export. On the contrary, the competitiveness of Thai rice includes technology, production capacity and high quality of rice production. The major competitiveness of Thai rice is brand loyalty, Thai rice has well known as high quality rice up to now, thus premium segment should be a target for Thai rice export market.

Keywords: Thai rice competitiveness, Chinese market, Thematic analysis, Thai rice export.

1. Introduction

It was reported that Thailand is still the largest rice exporter in the world (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2012). Headey (2011) also mentioned that Thailand has one of the least-restricted export sectors, even retaining low export barriers for rice during the 2007-2008 food price crises. According to the Thai Rice Exporters Association, the total volume of rice exported in 2012 was 6,954,511 metric tons, with a total value of US\$ 1,127 million. The largest regional market for Thai exports was Africa, which received 3,600,471 metric tons in 2012, accounting for 51.8% of total production (Global Trade Atlas, 2013; OAE, 2013).

Thailand already has an existing export market in China. However, the quantity of Thai rice exported to China dropped substantially or around 143,082 metric tons in 2012 as several competitors entered into the China market such as Vietnam (Thai Rice Exporters Association, 2013; DEP, 2013). This is a relatively sharp drop from previous years; for example, Thai rice exports to China accounted for 328,238 metric tons in 2009. In 2012, exports to China represented approximately 12.1% of the total exports to the Asian region, and about 2% of total exports. However, it should be noted that with the anticipated sharp rise in Chinese rice consumption, it is expected that Thai rice will become more in demand in the Chinese market. This effect can already be seen, with a 91.6% increase year-on-year for exports of Thai rice to China in the first quarter of 2013 (Thai Rice Exporters Association, 2013).

Regarding to the rice competitor producer, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) noted that Vietnam has exported 7 million metric tons of rice for the past three years, rising from 6.734 million metric tons in 2009 (IRRI, 2013a). Rice is a major export crop and one of the fundamental elements of the Vietnamese economy. The Vietnamese government is heavily involved in rice production and export, including setting prices and export rates and stockpiling rice for domestic use (IRRI, 2013b). This means that rice in

Vietnam, also a major domestic food crop, is treated differently than in Thailand. The growing presence of Vietnam in the global rice export sector and in China especially, poses a substantial challenge to Thailand's position in the Chinese import market.

Accordingly, this study endeavor (1) to reveal whether there is a competitive advantage of Thai rice exporters in the Chinese market as compare to Vietnamese rice exporter; (2) To what extend Thai rice exporter will improve the competitiveness of Thai rice exporters in the Chinese market and importantly (3) how to develop the competitiveness of Thai rice export to China export market.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed the qualitative research method. The qualitative research examines the participant point of views by using interactive and flexible strategies interview/observation. The qualitative research aimed at understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the participants(Wisker, 2007). Therefore, the qualitative method has been chosen to address the research objectives which are mainly to reveal deep understanding of the opinion from the research participants.

2.2. Interview Guideline

The interview guideline focuses on competency of the Thai rice production. The questions derived to describe the rice export distribution, implemented technology, product loyalty and the company development.

2.3. Research Participants

For in-depth interview, there were three interviewees selected for the research. Two interviewees were selected from the Thai rice exporters that responded to the survey, in order to deepen understanding of these responses. The third interviewee was a representative of the Thai government dealing with the rice export market and its issues.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis technique will be used for analysis of the qualitative data. This data is not hypothesis-directed and will not be studied using statistics. Instead, thematic analysis will be used in the qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis is a process where qualitative inputs (such as interview transcripts in this case) are analyzed for meaning and reflection on a particular area of the research concern (Ridenour and Newman, 2008).

3. The Result of the Case Interviews

Experts who provided valuable information for this study via their interviews are Managing Director and Production Manager of Rice Export companies and a retired government official from Office of Agricultural Economics. The summary of those above-mentioned details from interview in 3.1 appears in following.

3.1. Overview about Participants

• Please introduce yourself and explain your experience in rice industry

M#1 MD of rice export company where established since 1982. Done on rice export business alone. Not have domestic sales.

M#2 Production manager of rice export company where established since 1995. Done on rice export and domestic sales.

G#1 Retired government official in Office of Agriculture Economics, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Her responsibility is focused on field crop economics including rice section more than 20 years.

3.2. Thai Rice Exporters in China Market

The participating managers and government official were asked a number of questions about Thai rice exporters in China market. These questions and responses are as follows.

• Can you describe about China rice importing market, i.e. value, peak season, competition, types of rice product, or special requirement?

M#1 said, China is not the major customer. However, we have traded with China (Mainland) occasionally. Therefore, the Information may not be complete in the Chinese market.

As I knew, China import Thai's rice in order to mix with Chinese's rice and then sold to consumers. The rice is focused on the premium grade. But exporting to China is a condition that must be passed the audit of CCIC Company, which rather strict with the rice standard.

M#2 The company currently does not export rice to China because the company cannot compete on price with competitors.

• What are the problems that Thai's rice exporters face during the last 5 years of exporting rice to China?

Unsurprising, the primary problems that the exporters concerned are paying money late and not receive the goods at the port as scheduled. Therefore, the exporters must pay the fine in this case.M#1 asserted that another is the rice quality. In fact, rice exports to China need to be checked the quality by CCIC. But when the goods were delivered in China, it was mixed with Chinese rice (Indigenous rice). At the consumer end, the quality decrease. And sometimes rice is being branded as the new repack. Therefore, Thailand Jasmine rice 100%, which corresponds to a negative effect on the image of Thailand's rice.

Like M#1, M#2 also cited also cited increasing Thai's rice price as a significant role, though he noted that laws and regulations play a role as well.

3.3. Brand switch in China market

The participating managers and government official were asked a number of questions about brand switch in China market. These questions and responses are as follows.

• Do you agree or disagree with this statement "Recently, Thai's rice exporting to China has faced with brand switching problem, especially from Thai's exporters to Vietnamese's exporters"? Please give the reason to support your answer?

M#1said, Because of pledging scheme from current government, Loan pricing is very high. It makes a farmer want to pledge to government more than sell to Thai's rice Exporter companies. Furthermore, with the government set a price higher than the market price. The rice farmers are willing to give out the pledge. If you want to sell the rice price is not as good as this.

For this reason rice broke the pledge. It is a burden to the government to make the packing arrangement in this section. When most of the reports in the hands of government. Make a small quantity of rice in the market price of rice is not enough, but demand was so high jump over Thailand. Rice in neighboring countries, not only Vietnam but also Cambodia or India, it is the main competitors to come take market share of rice in Thailand.

M#2 suggested that China change to buy rice from Vietnam because the rice quality is slightly different while price is a big different. Therefore, Vietnam has an advantage in this regard. In addition, Vietnam has the advantage of using fewer chemicals, the cost of logistics and labor wages lower than Thailand. As a result, the cost of the sale price is set lower than Thailand.

"Export price of Vietnamese rice is cheaper", G#1 added. Price is one of the most important factors for buying rice. In 2001-2009, Thailand always exported white rice 5% and 25%, both of which Thailand and Vietnam are the main exporters, with higher price than Vietnam. From \$30 per ton higher in 2005, the price of white rice 5% from Thailand in 2009 was \$123 per ton higher than rice from Vietnam. Meanwhile, the difference between export prices of white rice 25% from Thailand and Vietnam was around \$5-11 per ton in 2001-2007, but the gap increased to \$50-76 per ton in 2008-2009.

3.4. Sources of Competitive Advantages of Thai Rice Exporters

The participating managers and government official were asked a number of questions about the sources of competitive advantages of Thai rice exporters. These questions and responses are as follows.

• In your opinion, what are the key success factors in terms of firm competencies of Thai's rice exporter in China market (such as technology, logistic, labor, brand loyalty) and why?

China is a very large market that the demand for rice consumption is high. Therefore, to supply rice to the Chinese market, technology and capacity of the company are the important factors making succeed in this market, M#1 said.

M#2 and G#1 added, technology and brand royalty are still strength of Thai's rice exporter. Thailand has been developed the technology for long time in all processes from cultivating to storage in silo. And also brand royalty that Thai's rice is superior to other competitors. Therefore, at the same price, Thai's rice is the first choice of consumers. So, these are the key success factors in term of firm competencies of Thai's rice exporter.

• In your opinion, what are the key success factors in terms of firm characteristics of Thai's rice exporter in China market (such as size, strategies, experiences, product quality)?

Overall, all participants reach a consensus that strategies are the key success factors in terms of firm characteristics of Thai's rice exporter in China market

The AEC has now caused the challenge for the Thai Ministry of Commerce to develop the strategies on Thai rice production and trade before its implementation in 2015. This can be the opportunity to retrieve Thai rice reputation, as it was owing to value-chain development and cooperation between government agencies and rice traders in the past decades. Due to the new policy, government agencies try to make a better living for Thai farmers and encourage them to produce a higher quality of rice. There are five strategies in the new setup in order to develop a *Thai Rice Standard*, which are: Strategy for Development, Strategy to Promote and Support Thai Farmers, Strategy for Long-term Marketing and Production Development, Strategy to Maintain Price Stability, Strategy of International Market.

The Ministry of Commerce did a SWOT analysis of these strategies and for example one of the strengths of the government is that they are paying farmers faster and more conveniently than would the minimum guaranteed income of the rice trade as in the previous policy, and it is a good tool to assist farmers who have oversupply of rice.

3.5. Thai vs. Vietnam Rice Exporters in China Market

The participating managers and government official were asked a number of questions about Thai vs. Vietnam rice exporters in China Market. These questions and responses are as follows.

• What are the strength areas of Thai's rice exporters in China market compared to Vietnam?

Overall, all participants agreed that Thai' rice quality is the strength area of Thai's rice exporters in China market.

However, M# and M#2 suggested that Thailand cannot count on its reputation for producing high-quality rice and charge too much for it, as the global market is highly competitive and consumers are more willing to accept slightly lower quality to save money on this staple food.

• What are the weakness areas of Thai's rice exporters in China compared to Vietnam?

Many factors contribute to Vietnam's advantages in producing rice, pointing out that Vietnam has lower rice production costs than Thailand, while its government has a clear policy to increase its rice yield. The "three decrease and three increase" measure is the main strategy, which has helped Vietnam to earn more profits of 15-20 per cent. M#1said, the 'three decrease' means lowering the quantity of seed so as to suit the cultivation area, depending less on chemical fertilizer use, and also on herbicide. The 'three increase' is to raise

the quantity of rice yield, the quality and profits. From this data, M#1 said Thailand will start to lose more of its market share and ability to compete in the rice market both in China and in other regions, whereas Vietnam will be able to catch up with Thailand within ten years.

At present, Vietnam can yield rice production at 862.4 kg per rai(0.16 ha) of paddy land, listed as the 7th rank in ASEAN, whereas Thailand is nearly half that level at 448 kg, considered as lower than an average quantity of 680 kg per rai(0.16 ha). In addition, when comparing the cost of rice production in Can Tho and Ayudhaya, which are main rice producing provinces in both countries, the cost of seeds and other expenses (wages, machinery, etc.) in Can Tho is lower while the cost of fertilizer and insecticide is higher than in Ayudhaya. The total cost per rai in Ayudhaya is US\$189, US\$26 higher than in Can Tho. However yield per rai in Can Tho is 99 kilograms higher than in Ayudhaya, M#2 added.

Rice exports are projected to plunge to only 6.5 million tonnes this year, the lowest volume in a dozen years, because of uncompetitive prices. "The price gap between Thailand and rice-exporting rivals has been widening because of the high pledging price and the baht's strength. Local exporters are having a tougher time competing with other rice growers, especially Vietnam, whose prices are lower by US\$170 a tonne," M#2 said. M#1, said that if the price of Thai rice were US\$100 per tonne lower, it would regain its lost market share. "Chinese consumer behavior has changed to lower-quality rice because of high prices of Thai rice and slowing economic growth. The Thai government should set a competitive price for rice, which should be lower than the current price by US\$100 a tonne in order to narrow the gap between Thai [rice] and its rivals," M#2 and G#1 said.

3.6. Opportunities and Suggestions for Thai Rice Exporters

The participating managers and government official were asked a number of questions about the opportunities and suggestions for Thai rice exporters. These questions and responses are as follows.

• Do you think, are there any opportunities or advantages for Thai's rice exporters to complete in Chinese market? If yes, what are those opportunities or advantages?

M#1 Thailand may lose its competitive edge as the world's top rice exporter to its major competitor, Vietnam; unless it reduces production costs and increases its rice harvest as well as improves marketing strategies and rice quality. M1# also commented that the outlook is a cause for concern as Thailand's export quantity has been lowered and lost its markets to Vietnam which is experiencing continuous growth in rice exports. "Consumers' behavior has been changing because Chinese want to buy cheaper products, not only rice. Thailand needs to adjust [to the needs of] Chinese consumers to ensure that the country will be able to keep [its current] market share and regain the loss of market share" M#2 said.

To promote Thai rice, Chong suggested that the country ensure competitive prices and target direct marketing activities at modern traders. The Thai government should also advertise more about methods of preparing Thai rice dishes and prevent the contamination of quality with substandard varieties, M#2 added.

To be able to maintain competitiveness, Thailand must adjust by implementing four measures -- increase the volume of the rice harvest per rai(0.16 ha), lower rice production costs, and to improve marketing strategies and rice qualities such as in terms of taste. Also, the government needs a policy that helps Thai farmers to achieve at least a 30-per cent profit from production costs, G#1 suggested.

• What are your suggestions for Thai's rice exporters and government to gain competitive advantage over competitors in China market?

3.7. Suggestions for Thai's Rice Exporters

M#1suggested that rice traders have been urged to focus more on innovation and the development of processed products to offset slower exports of grain during an era of intense competition. The development of rice into processed rice and other products would be a way for the industry to survive amid a continued drop in exports.

Tougher competition in the world market has led to a gradual decline in Thai rice exports. Exporting nations such as Vietnam, India and other countries in the region have increased their export volume, selling at lower prices than Thai exports.

Exports of Thai rice grain dropped by 50 per cent in the first two months of the year, because of higher prices under the government's pledging project. Other countries' grain is US\$100 per tonne lower than the Thai equivalent. However, exports of rice products such as cosmetics, healthcare goods and processed food have consistently increased in the past few years.

Like M#1 "Traders will enjoy more added value from the development of rice into processed food and other products. The margin will be at least 30-40 per cent higher if traders invest more on innovation and product development," M#2 said.

G#1 also agreed that Thailand might no longer be able to enjoy exporting merely rice grain, and it should focus more on product development. All concerned should realise the Kingdom's strength as a center of rice production and trading.

According to the Thai Rice Exporters Association, the value of rice-product trading is currently US\$100 million a year. This is estimated to grow by 10-15 per cent a year. Rice products that have increased recognition among consumers are rice-bran cooking oil, moisturizers made from rice, serum, rice soap and cosmetics, G#1 said.

3.8. Suggestions for Government

Overall, all participants reach a consensus on the pledging scheme could destroy Thai rice exports.

M#1 suggested that government subsidies implemented for farmers are aimed at short-term solutions and artificially inflate prices. As a result, Thai farmers are losing their competitive edge. Thailand does not have sufficient research and development centres to develop Thai rice strains to move ahead of other countries that are fast catching up with Thailand. The newly introduced rice policy of the

current government will make things even worse for Thai farmers. The rice pledging scheme is an exemplary case of how a short-sighted rice subsidy policy will severely affect Thai farmers. This policy will become a tax burden, create a price advantage for Vietnam and add a price burden for local consumers. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra used the rice pledging programme during her campaign to attract farmers, who account for a majority of Thais. Although the subsidy is an attractive campaign feature, the programme will not strengthen Thai farmers. It will further weaken them and make them more dependent instead of enabling them to stand on their own. The failure of previous governments' subsidy programmes is evidenced by the fact that most Thai farmers are still living in poverty and are desperately reliant on government support. The assistance programmes should have made our farmers stronger, but that is not the case. First of all, the high pledging price will distort the market. The Yingluck government plans to buy paddy at US\$499 per tonne from farmers, compared to the market price of around US\$294 per tonne of white rice. The artificial high price of Thai rice will erode its competitiveness on the global market, especially compared to cheaper rice from Vietnam.

Like M#1, M#2 and G#1 also cited that the government may claim that the pledging scheme will push up rice prices on the world market because the Thai rice price is considered a benchmark. But Thailand does not have the influence to ask the other Organization of Rice Exporting Countries to increase their prices in parallel, in the same fashion that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries do. It is estimated that the price of Thai white rice on the world market will rise from US\$500 to US\$800-US \$850 per tonne after the rice pledging programme. But, in reality, Vietnamese producers will offer much lower prices than Thai exporters because they don't have any reason to increase their price. The scheme also puts pressure on rice prices on the domestic market, as prices are set to rise from the current US\$0.49 per kilograms to US\$0.66. Consumers will not mind spending more on rice if the farmers receive benefits, but they do not. Farming should be supported to ensure the continuation of our food security and traditional lifestyle. But price rises will now likely come from speculation. Already, some rice brokers are hoarding produce ahead of the implementation of the pledging policy. The main beneficiaries of this pledging scheme will be the rice millers, not the farmers, especially the small-scale farmers with no silos or equipment to dehydrate paddy to the level required by the pledging scheme. The government of the late Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej implemented a rice pledging programme that left a burden of more than 5 million tonnes of stockpiled rice that the succeeding government was forced to sell at a loss to rice exporters and millers. Subservient small farmers are the target group of the government's subsidy. But they are unable to pledge their rice because they don't have storage facilities. They have to rush to sell their paddy at a lower price to middlemen. Most of these buyers have the facility to store and dehydrate the paddy. They can keep stock in their facilities and wait to cash in on the subsidy programme. This programme will in no way serve its stated purpose to help farmers - not to mention the fact that such massive schemes like this are an open invitation to corruption. These policies have weakened farmers' ability to compete. The government does not provide sufficient research and development work to assist farmers in improving their methods and yields. Big corporations meanwhile control the new technology to develop farming and refuse to share this information with the majority of farmers. To sum up, small farmers have become weaker and big corporations have become stronger as they manage to control both the production and the market. In fact, farmers don't want these subsidies that have only short-term results, but they do want policies to help them in the long run, such as good irrigation, innovations to improve rice strains and an assistance programme to help improve their productivity. It is unfortunate that Thai governments, this one in particular, never focus on how to promote the capacity of our farmers in a sustainable manner.

4. The Main Conclusions of the Interviews

The key findings from the interviews focus on five key areas, including issues of Thai rice exporters in China, brand switching in China, sources of competitive advantage for Thai rice exporters, comparison of Thai and Vietnamese rice exports in the Chinese market, and opportunities and suggestions for Thai rice exporters.

Brand switching is seen as a serious problem, once again attributable to price and quality problems. M#1 sees the Thai rice market as struggling under the rice pledge, which reduces the incentive to sell to the export market. The government also does not make a strong contribution, since it does not package the products very well. M#2 also notes that brand switching to Vietnamese rice is a problem, noting that Vietnamese rice is much less expensive (because of lower chemical use and lower logistics and labor costs), while the quality is not so different. While, G#1 does point out that Hom Mali (jasmine) rice is still popular, this is, as he argued above, a niche market compared to most exports, which are low-quality white rice.

The most important competitive advantages included technology, production capacity, and quality (especially of the premium rice segment). A variety of competitive advantages are found in the Thai rice industry for Chinese export by M#1, including technology and production capacity, company image, and ability to communicate in Thailand. The government official agreed that technology is important. Factors mentioned by M#2 include low production prices and logistics costs (especially using ships instead of road transport, like Vietnamese producers do). G#1 stated that brand loyalty is a competitive advantage, but this is uncertain given M#1's statement that lower-quality Chinese rice is mixed into even premium rice on import to China. G#1 also noted product quality is important. She was once again the only one to mention brand.

The biggest advantage for Thai rice over Vietnamese rice was in the premium rice segment. M#1 notes that Thai rice still has several advantages over Vietnam, including more cultivation area and better quality of premium rice (though white rice is about the same). M#2 agreed that quality was an advantage. He saw this as the main opportunity for competition. G#1 also agreed that product quality was the most important factor, particularly in the premium rice market.

Thai rice also has several weaknesses, including lower yields and higher costs (especially production, labor, and logistics cost). M#1 also points to a disconnection between the attempted development of high-quality jasmine rice standards and the end consumer products in China, which are lower quality since they are mixed with Chinese rice. This seriously affects the competitiveness of Jasmine rice as a high-quality product. As M#2 points out, in China there is a big difference in price of Thai and Vietnamese rice as

seen by the end consumer, but not much difference in quality. This makes it hard to establish Thai rice as a distinct commodity. The government official agreed with M#2 that logistics costs, including transfer from the field to the miller via road rather than boat as well as from Thailand to China in the same fashion, was a major disadvantage.

The most common recommendation was eliminating the paddy pledging program, followed by cost reduction measures. The main recommendation of M#1 is that the pledging scheme should be reduced or even cancelled, in order to increase rice export capacity. He points out that rice is perishable, and that it will not be possible to store the product for long and then export it as high quality. He also suggests that this will reduce the price of rice, making it more competitive in international markets with producers like Vietnam. M#2 agreed with this statement. He also argued that changing to shipping rather than truck transport would reduce the cost of transport and increase the competitiveness of the market. Furthermore, Thai and Chinese governments need to cooperate on the export of rice. Further recommendations from G#1 included decreasing cost of operations (such as cost of seed and chemicals) and improving the rice varieties, as well as changing or eliminating the price pledging program.

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