

Chinese Consumers' Purchase Intentions toward Thailand's Organic Rice Based on Marketing Ethics

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Abstract: This article aimed to study the dimensions of influencing Chinese consumers' purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics. The original survey instrument comprised 25 statements and data were collected in the mainland of China including 110 valid online responses were collected. Data analysis was using exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings of the study revealed Chinese consumers' purchase intentions toward Thailand's organic rice are influenced by the marketing ethics factors of organic rice and ethnocentrism. Additionally, the two factors have direct or indirect impacted on pre-purchase evaluation and purchase intentions. Chinese Consumers' attitudes toward the purchase of Thailand's organic food rice were influenced pre-purchase evaluation and pre-purchase evaluation also impacted on the purchase intention of existing and potential consumers.

Keywords: Chinese Consumers, Thailand Organic Rice, Purchase Intentions, Pre-Purchase Evaluation, Marketing Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The Twentieth Century has seen agricultural modernization that had long-lasting impacts on rural areas and societies. The adverse effects of industrialized agriculture on social, ecological, and economic sectors have awakened policymakers to realize the importance of organic agriculture and sustainable food production. Consumers have become increasingly aware of food safety and quality issues. Educated societies prioritize health, including children's health, and demand nutritious and naturally produced foods [1]. In the last decades, an increase research trends on organic foods is emerging. Organic food products are perceived as being more nutritious and healthier, safer and environmentally friendly. They contain less chemical residues and taste better than conventional food; hence, consumers are willing to pay a premium price to eliminate pesticides in organic food [2]. Even in newly emerging markets, consumers are willing to pay a higher price for better quality, taste and foods certified as 'safe' [3].

Agriculture is the most critical sector for sustaining economic growth and reducing poverty. From the total area in Thailand of holdings, 116.5 million Rais, about half of the area (50.8%) as the area under rice, 50% of the total population, or 5.8 million households, are engaged in agriculture [4]. Thailand is

the world's largest rice exporter to China. The export value of rice in 2015 is 17,248 million THB, in 2016 is 17,784 million THB, in 2017 is 20,440 million THB. Steadily at the top 2 of the rice exported country to the world's population [5].

In China, agriculture is both the foundation and a major pillar of the national economy. Although China has organic production, it cannot meet its domestic demand for certain organic products. The growing demand for chemical free and healthy food in China and other developed countries reflects the presence of substantial organic food markets worldwide.

The studies in relation to organic food consumption have been conducted handfully in Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, India and Thailand. As best as can be ascertained, very few studies of this nature have been undertaken in China [6], a fast-growing economy where organic foods are increasingly being marketed. Yin *et al.* claim that none of the previous studies have analyzed factors that affect consumers' choice of organic food in the mainland Chinese market. Their research revealed that consumers' intention to purchase organic food was influenced by the level of income, degree of trust and

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acceptance of organic food, and health-related issues. Little knows or understood about Chinese consumers' attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as following: 1) To understand the current situation of organic rice consumption in China. 2) To investigate the key factors, Chinese consumers' attitude, pre- evaluation and purchase intentions toward Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics. 3) To provide suggestions and recommendations to improve the export of Thailand's organic rice to China.

The conceptual framework and literature review

The article aims to investigate the dimensions influencing Chinese consumers' attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics. This framework is embedded in three underpinning theories, which are: the consumer decision-making process (CDP) model developed by Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel [7], the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) developed by Ajzen [8] and the 'hierarchy of effects' model as initiated by

Barry and Howard. The four dimensions of the conceptual framework are influencing, cognitive and affective, evaluation of alternatives and purchase intentions. Essentially, the proposed conceptual framework is a staged model which assumes that consumers move through a rational problem-solving process in ultimately purchasing organic food. This problem-solving process in consumers' minds (cognitive and affective factors) involves the search and processing of information as suggested by the CDP model and by the TPB (beliefs, attitudes and norms). Steenkamp [13] suggest a classification of factors or variables that potentially influence consumer decision-making. The forms the first stage of the proposed conceptual framework. As a result of the extensive literature review of organic food studies, it was decided to include the following relevant constructs which influence Chinese consumers' attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics: organic product, regulation, and ethnocentrism. Organic food product-related items comprised physical appearance, smell, taste, sensory appeal, nutritional value and price. Ethnocentrism comprised items related to country of origin. Each of the constructs in Figure 1 is discussed and relevant hypotheses developed.

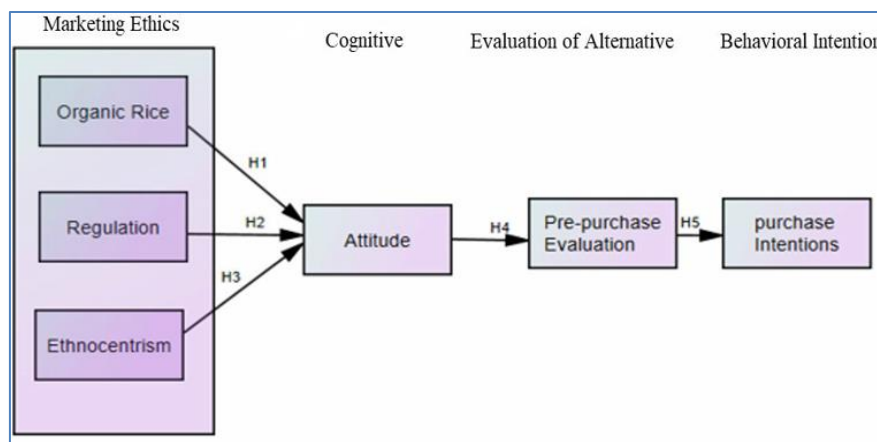


Fig-1: The research framework for Chinese consumers' attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions toward Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics

Thailand's organic rice

The literature on organic food consumption suggests that consumers' evaluation of the product itself is key to their consumption, with attention being given primarily to sensory appeal as well as price. A study by Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle [9] reveals that concern for health, moods, the convenience of food preparation, and sensory appeal are components in food choice. Organic food purchase is motivated by consumers' sensory appeal and concern for health [10]. Existing consumers consider organic food as being healthy, environmentally friendly and not so expensive [11]. Sensory attributes normally relate to consumers'

perceptions of the appearance, texture and flavor of the organic food. Historically, Chinese consumers place high expectations on the original flavor, taste and freshness of food products. Many Chinese, particularly the elderly, prefer to purchase fresh foods on a daily basis. The freshness, flavor and texture add value to the food products [12].

The Thai government invested about 25 million dollars in 2018. This ambitious program aims to help farmers' groups to convert to organic farming providing technical and financial support. In 2015, 168,310 rai of rice were certified organic, representing

0.55% of the domestic market in Thailand [13]. The organic market in Thailand has continued to grow in recent years steadily, and consists of five major segments, each with different motivations, namely: organic-oriented families, consumers seeking health and nutrition (usually for infants and pregnant women), those undergoing medical treatment, the elderly and the infirm, and foreigners. Most of Thailand organic crops are produced for export. To date, rice farming occupies 53% of the total farmland and it employs 70% of the total labor force in Thailand, 50% of the total production is dedicated to the export market [14]. Based on the above discussion, it is postulated that:

H1a: Thailand's organic rice related attributes have a positive influence on the attitudes of Chinese consumers.

H1b: Thailand's organic rice related attributes are positively correlated to Chinese consumers' pre-purchase evaluation.

H1c: Thailand's organic rice related attributes are positively correlated to Chinese consumers' purchase intentions.

Regulation

There is a relatively poor understanding of the legal use of the term 'organic' on food products including inspection and certification systems [8]. Organic food products are associated with misleading labelling and certification [15], low-profile distribution channels and lack of perceived value [16]. Consumers generally avoid purchasing food products that do not have signs of product quality [18]. Labeling seems to be one of the critical issues in relation to the purchase of organic food. Despite the general awareness of organic food labels in Greece, almost half of the buyers seem confused about the differentiation between organic and conventional food products [15].

Several certification bodies in Thailand offer organic certification to producers; two local organizations are particularly significant. The first is the Organic Crop Institute, a public agency under the umbrella of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives that offers free certification. The second is the Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand (ACT), a private non-profit foundation, which was established in 1995 that offers fee-based services. Besides these, many local third-party certification bodies also exist, along with several foreign certification bodies that operate their own offices or operate through local agencies [18]. The Northern Organic Standards Organization is a private certification body that caters only to farms and crops from Thailand's northern Chiang Mai Province. This organization established a group-certification program based on collaboration and mutual trust between farmers and consumers.

H2a: Regulations associated with Thailand's organic rice have a positive influence on the attitudes of Chinese consumers.

H2b: Regulations associated with Thailand's organic rice are positively correlated to consumers' pre-purchase evaluation.

H2c: Regulations associated with Thailand's organic rice are positively correlated to consumers' purchase intentions.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon and is deeply rooted in most areas of intergroup relations. Shimp and Sharma [19] defined consumer ethnocentrism as the beliefs (knowledge structures and thought processes) held by consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products in place of domestic ones. There is a tendency for consumers to evaluate their own country's products more favorably than do consumers from other countries [20].

Previous research demonstrates that country of origin is an important element for organic food consumers. Norwegian consumers trust locally produced organic goods as being safer than imported cheaper organic foods [16]. Seventy-two percent of Danish consumers buy domestically produced conventional fruit and vegetables rather than foreign produced organic ones [21]. Organic food buyers in Greece are very 'traditional' and the country of origin theme seems to have a significant influence on Greek consumers [11].

For consumers in developing countries, buying foreign products is generally considered a social symbol, and is also very trendy, particularly for those products which originate from prestigious countries [22]. A contradictory report portrays Chinese consumers as being no longer interested in foreign brands or products. Domestic products are seen to provide better value with good enough or matching quality at lower prices [23]. After more than a decade of embracing all things Western, Chinese are turning to things Chinese [24]. From ancient times, the Chinese population has valued patriotism. This value is widely reflected among people of all ages and areas and this influences the consumers' attitudes toward foreign-made products. However, their attitudes toward western luxury goods are changing and recently appear to be generally positive. Based on the above discussions, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H3a: Ethnocentrism has a negative influence on the attitudes of Chinese consumers towards the purchase of Thailand's organic rice.

H3b: Ethnocentrism is negatively correlated to the pre-purchase evaluation of Chinese consumers towards the purchase of Thailand's organic rice.

H3c: Ethnocentrism is negatively correlated to Chinese consumers' purchase intentions of Thailand's organic rice.

Pre-purchase and purchase intentions

The purchase of organic food products is based on subjective experiences and perception of these products [17]. It is perceived that organic food is healthier, natural, nutritious and environmentally friendly. Consumers with positive attitudes towards organic food are more likely to display positive behavioral and purchase intentions [25]. Health consciousness is a major motivation for buying and consuming organic foods [26]. A European Action Plan states that 'increasing consumers' organic knowledge is of vital importance for the demand of organic food because organic knowledge influences attitudes towards organic food products that directly determine the decision or intention to buy the product' [27]. Based on existing literature and the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H4: Chinese consumers' attitudes towards Thailand's organic rice is directly and positively correlated to their pre-purchase evaluation.

H5: The pre-purchase evaluation of Chinese consumers of organic rice is directly and positively related to their purchase intentions.

Marketing Ethics

The definition of marketing ethics (ME): ME is defined as the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and institutions [28]. It draws on two distinct fields: (a) philosophy which is normative, and values focused, and, (b) social Science, which is positive/descriptive and, often empirical.

Many of the consumer studies on organic food have considered factors that facilitate or limit organic food consumption. They have dealt with motivations to purchase organic food, including health concern, environmental concern, food safety, sensory variables, ethical concerns or value structure [29, 30]. Factors found to limit organic food choice are high price, limited availability, and satisfaction with conventional food, lack of trust and lack of perceived value [11]. Finding segments of ethical consumers is thus crucial for product positioning. These segments are difficult to identify using the traditional socio-demographic variables because organic food consumers are present in all groups in society [31]. With knowledge of consumers' different ethical beliefs (environmental, political and religious), marketing communication can

be based on a broader register than attitudes based on product attributes.

The study describes that consumer choices reflect not only price and quality preferences but also social and moral values, as witnessed in the remarkable growth of the global market for organic products. Consumers think that organic products are costly. But at the same time, they believe that higher price can be paid for healthy and eco-friendly products. This is the normal consumer behaviour, taking advantage of this, is unethical and should not be practiced. In recent years this has been a growing debate about ethical aspects of production and trade [32].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1) The questionnaire's design

The questionnaire contains two parts; the primary data is divided into basic information of respondents and factors that influence consumers' purchase intention toward organic rice. Part two, including organic rice, regulation, ethnocentrism, attitude, pre-purchase evaluation, purchase intention. The original survey instrument comprised 25 statements. Likert five-point Scale (5 - Point Scale) was used in the study.

2) Sampling design

The study focused on investigating Chinese consumers' purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics as the research scope; the questionnaires are distributed to those who are willing to assist the investigation by the questionnaire website. Data were collected in the mainland of China. 110 valid online surveys were collected. The online survey was available via the wjx platform. Wjx platform combined with Wechat, the survey data can transmit to wjx platform in the Moment. Anyone who had bought organic rice can participate in the survey; the software enables the production and reporting of a study. It ensures anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy to the participant. 110 questionnaires were collected, with an effective recovery rate of 100%.

3) Research Tool

The study investigated the dimensions influencing Chinese consumers' attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions towards Thailand's organic rice based on marketing ethics. Full Model data were analyzed by the SPSS23 and the evaluation of model fit was observed by the AMOS21. Data analysis was using exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM).

RESULTS

1) Descriptive statistical analysis

The respondents' characteristics include gender, age, education level, income per month

(yuan), and household size. The statistical analysis results are shown in Table 1:

Table-1: The Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents	Rang	N (N=110)	%
Gender	Female	82	74.55
	male	28	25.45
Age	18-30	27	24.55
	31-45	61	55.45
	46-60	22	20
	≥60	0	0
Education	Graduate and above	8	7.27
	College or university	61	55.45
	senior school and blow	8	7.27
Income per month (yuan)	Under 2000	4	3.64
	2001-4000	18	16.36
	4001-6000	44	40
	Above 6001	44	40
Types of household	single	13	11.82
	Single live with parents	8	7.27
	Couples without children	12	10.91
	Couples with young children	59	53.64
	Couples with adult children	18	16.36

On gender, the proportion of female is 82 coves 74.55%, while the male is 28 coves 25.45%. On age, the percentage of "31-45 years old" is the highest coves 56.95%, while aged above 60 is 0%, that because online survey via WeChat is unavailable to this group of persons. On education, college or university is 61 highest covers55.45%. On income per month, 2001-4000 as same as above 6001, both of group cove 40%. On types of household, couple with young children is 59 highest coves 53.64%.

2) Factors analysis

The data were tested by KMO sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s test of sphericity. Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) was performed for every construct of the conceptual framework. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values exceeded the recommended value of 0.7. Bartlett’s test of sphericity value was significant (p<0.05) and Cattell’s scree test was also used [24]. According to Table 2 that the regulation KMO is 0.512 less than 0.7, it is not suitable for factor analysis, need to be deleted, while others variable suitable for factor analysis.

Table-2: KMO Value

Dimension	KMO	Bar-Type Ball Test		
		χ^2	df	p-value
Organic Rice	0.843	278.037	10	0.000***
Ethnocentrism	0.742	184.811	3	0.000***
Regulation	0.512	69.495	10	0.000***
Attitudes	0.706	160.982	3	0.000***
Pre-purchase Evaluation	0.741	192.359	3	0.000***
Purchase Intention	0.752	166.325	3	0.000***

The study investigated the dimensions influencing Chinese consumers’ attitude, pre-evaluation and purchase intentions towards Thailand’s organic rice based on marketing ethics. Full Model data were

analyzed by the SPSS23 and the evaluation of Model Fit was observed by the AMOS21, the result was showing in the Table 3:

Table-3: Linear Structure Data Analysis

	Relation	Standardized Factor loading	Z-value	P-value	
VARIABLES	Organic Rice	OR1	0.747	-	
		OR2	0.754	7.888	***
		OR3	0.790	8.297	***
		OR4	0.816	8.592	***
		OR5	0.759	7.954	***
	Ethnocentrism	E1	0.831	-	
		E2	0.890	10.597	***
		E3	0.841	10.100	***
	Attitudes	A1	0.731	-	-
		A2	0.938	9.388	***
		A3	0.804	8.358	***
	Pre-purchase Evaluation	RE1	0.809	-	-
		PE2	0.880	10.816	***
		PE3	0.887	10.935	***
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.939	-	-	
	PI2	0.801	11.266	***	
FIT INDEX	Chi Square(χ^2)	151.146			
	Degree of freedom (df.)	95			
	χ^2/df	1.591			
	GFI	0.921			
	AGFI	0.896			
	CFI	0.953			
	TLI	0.941			
	RMR	0.045			
SRMR	0.066				
*p-value<0.05 ** p-value<0.01 ***p-value<0.001					

After confirming the full model suitability, the research will further explore the relationship between

the variables. The path analysis results of the study are shown in Table 4.

Table-4: The Path Analysis Results

Hypothesis	Research Path	Standardized Factor loading	Z-value	P-value	Hypothetical Relationship	Hypothesis Result
H1a	Organic Rice ---> Attitudes	0.842	6.421	***	Positive	Accept
H1b	Organic rice ----> Pre-purchase Evaluation	0.332	1.593	*	--	Reject
H1c	Organic rice ----> Purchase Intention	0.292	3.905	***	Positive	Accept
H3a	Ethnocentrism ---> Attitudes	0.109	-1.372	*	--	Reject
H3b	Ethnocentrism ---> Pre-purchase Evaluation	0.322	-2.932	***	Positive	Accept
H3c	Ethnocentrism---->Purchase Intention	0.044	-0.668	*	--	Reject
H4	Attitudes----> Pre-purchase Evaluation	0.752	7.578	***	Positive	Accept
H5	Pre-purchase Evaluation ----> Purchase Intention	0.782	9.056	** *	Positive	Accept

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Clearly hypothesis one is partially supported, has a significant relationship with attitudes and purchase intention. and no significant relationship with pre-purchase evaluation. The results also reveal that organic rice has an indirect effect on purchase intention, which implies that this construct is associated with purchase intention through the mediatory effect of beliefs/attitudes and pre-purchase evaluation.

In case of hypothesis three is partially supported. Ethnocentrism has significant influences on pre-purchase evaluation. The results also revealed that this construct had direct effects on purchase intention.

Evidently hypotheses four and five are supported. Attitudes had a significant influence on pre-purchase evaluation (p-value was significant) and pre-

purchase evaluation had a significant influence on purchase intention (p-value was significant).

The final model of purchase intention of Chinese Consumers toward Thailand's organic rice Based on Marketing Ethics as Figure 2.

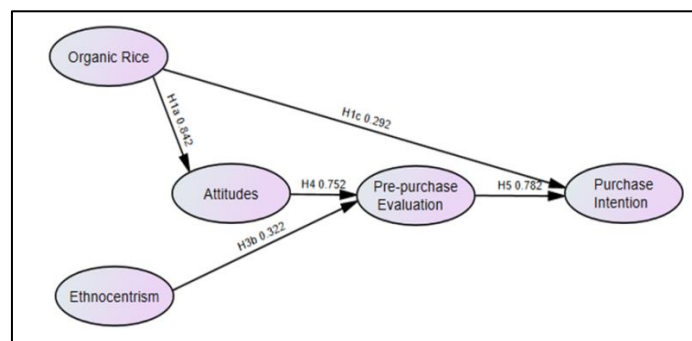


Fig-2: Validated final model of purchase intention of Chinese Consumers toward Thailand's organic rice Based on Marketing Ethics

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study revealed that Chinese consumers' attitudes, pre-purchase evaluation are positively and directly influenced by marketing ethics factors: organic rice and ethnocentrism. The results also revealed that organic rice and ethnocentrism had significant influences on purchase intention through the mediatory effect of attitudes and pre-purchase evaluation. The characteristics of organic food had both direct and indirect effects on the purchase intentions of consumers towards organic food products. Items including Thailand's organic rice safety-no chemical residue, Thailand's organic rice looks nice, Thailand's organic rice smells nice, Thailand's organic rice has high nutritional value, Thailand's organic rice idea for Children's diet. Unfortunately, items relating to regulations are deleted due to regulation KMO being 0.512 less than 0.7. It is not suitable for factor analysis and needs to be deleted; hence, we cannot ascertain whether regulations are essential for consumers purchasing organic food products in China.

Although Thailand organic food is perceived as being good for the environment, consumers may prefer to buy less travelled organic products from local rather than from distant sources shipped from overseas [33]. Ethnocentric attitudes may develop through Chinese consumers' desires to support the local industry [11]. This study revealed that ethnocentrism did not significantly influence Chinese consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions. These findings are supported by Hsu and Nien's [6] who suggest that Chinese consumers' ethnocentrism toward imported products in big cities tends to be diluted, particularly when they are exposed to foreign products.

This research combined three theoretical models, namely, the TPB, the theory of CDP and the theory of the hierarchy of effects. The findings of the study have important implications for Thailand's

organic rice market to China. They should attempt to leverage these findings by educating both existing and potential consumers and promoting the trial of Thailand's organic rice. Beneficiaries of this research study showed include various stakeholders in Chinese import and export organizations, consumers, vendors, including local community and government agencies for future research endeavor.

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