

The Rural Market in Late Imperial China

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Abstract

The rural market was an important constituent of marketing system, and formed an un-vertical congruent relationship with urban market in late imperial China. There were different types of rural fair in the imperial China. Xu, Chang, Ji, Dian, Shi, Hui, all of them were the regular fairs. Their number was huge. They distributed widely, played a distinct role, and became the base of rural market development. During Tang and Song dynasties, county seat, town or village had some regular fairs. They were more and more developed during Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. In the late imperial China, the establishment or abolishment of rural regular fair must be approved by local magistrate, such as magistrate of a county. Equally important, the clan and Gentleman played the crucial role in rural market. On the whole, the network of rural fairs began to take shape in the most regions from Qianlong to Daoguang reigning years of the Qing Dynasty. The professional markets in rural society included two kinds: professional town and professional fair. The emergence of professional markets in rural society was the inevitable result of enlargement of cash crops planting and development of social division of labor, and helped in the shaping of specialized region which centered on cash farming.

Keywords: Late Imperial China, Rural market, Rural fair, Professional market

1. Preface

Many scholars have discussed the rural market in late imperial China. (Note 1)Based on it, I put forward my view of the parallel market-relation between city and rural area from the standpoint of marketing system. (Note 2) The rural market was an important constituent of marketing system, and formed an un-vertical congruent relationship with urban market in late imperial China. Here, I will discuss the rural market which includes fair and professional market.

2. Rural Fair

There were different types of rural fair in the imperial China. With regard to opening time, rural fair may be divided into regular fair, un-regular fair, half-regular fair, and everyday fair. Among them, regular fair was the most common. With regard to trade amount, rural fair may be divided into large fair, small fair, and hui which involve temple fair and particular fair. With regard to fair location, rural fair may be divided into village fair, town fair, mountain fair, etc. With regard to trader, rural fair may be divided into common people's fair and military fair. With regard to commodity, rural fair may be divided into cattle fair, rice fair, fruit fair, silk fair, etc. With regard to tax, rural fair may be divided into official fair and tax-free fair. With regard to function, rural fair may be divided into four types: the first was to meet farmer's general demand mainly, the second was to meet farmer's productive demand mainly, the third was to distribute some goods mainly, and the fourth was temple fair. Because of regular fair was the center of rural fair, I will focus on it.

Xu, Chang, Ji, Dian, Shi, Hui, all of them were the regular fairs. Their number was huge. They distributed widely, played a distinct role, and became the base of rural market development. The name of these primary markets had some regional characters: Ji in the North, Xu in Guangdong, Guangxi and Fujian, Chang in Sichuan and Guizhou, Xu in Jiangxi, Shi in Hubei and Hunan. In the lower reaches of the Yangze River, the larger fair was called town, and rural fair was not developed there. However, there were still some regular fairs in the lower reaches of the Yangze River, especially in Changzhou Fu, Zhenjiang, etc. They did not decline along with everyday fair's prosperity. On the contrary, they lasted a long time. It was not the symptom of rural market's agensis, but perfect display of marketing system in the countryside.

During Tang and Song dynasties, county seat, town or village had some regular fairs. They were more and more

developed during Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. At that time, there were some stationary shops in the villages and towns. However, the main trades were held in regular fair, such as tea, silk, etc. Rural fair had neither city wall nor stationary store. Besides opening time, there were no differences between rural fair and village. This is illustrated in Guangdong and Hunan. Rural fair was greatly convenient to grass-roots' lives, and became an important part of traditional commodity economy. It's not difficult to understand why ancient historians called them village fair, or give exact directions to them in the countryside, such as certain Du or Tu.

In the late imperial China, the establishment or abolishment of rural regular fair must be approved by local magistrate, such as magistrate of a county. Because many local magistrates set up fairs and encouraged rednecks to trade, the local government gave a full play in commercial activity and market operation. Meanwhile, local magistrates established rural fairs in order to placate folk mind and to maintain social stability. A historical book *Chu-nan-miao-zhi* was a proof of it. So, establishing market and guaranteeing commodity circulation were significant measures for complying with humanity and caring about the people's livelihood. Moreover, improving and standardizing market order were necessary to safeguard local peace. Equally important, the clan and Gentleman played the crucial role in rural market.

Apart from village, many ordinary towns had some fairs. They may be everyday fairs as Shengze town in Jiangsu, or regular fair as Shexian in Henan. Another example was Kaipin town and Zhenzi town in Luanzhou which was directly under central government had two large fairs and small fairs per ten days. There were also some towns which had five fairs or three fairs per ten days. In addition, Jiangxi street, Anjiang fair, Xinlu fair and Tongwan fair in Qianyang county of Hunan Province were classified as town, instead of rural fair. But, the two towns had their fairs, and presented a combined type of market. To a certain extent, a town often set up some fairs and their opening time remained unchanged. It suggested that town played a dominant and decisive role in rural market. The super town had also some regular fairs. Even if the multifunctional developed town also maintained fairs which opened at noon and closed at dusk, in order to facilitate peasants' sale of vegetables, fruits, fishes, etc., and to meet lifestyle needs of town residents. For example, according to history record, Wangjiangjin town in Xiushui county of Zhejiang had different fairs which sold salt, rice, fish and prawn. The subjects of deal in these fairs were mostly peasants, businessmen and town residents. On the whole, these fairs lost their intrinsic characteristics and became a part of town trade.

Strictly speaking, the place of regular fair was different between city and village. As a primary market in the rural society, fair lied within villages and was quite close to peasants' real life. Its service object was mainly village residents. The commodity of fairs focused on capital goods and daily necessities that peasants needed. As some ancient historians said, there were necessarily some fairs among villages so as to bring convenience to local trade and promote agriculture and business jointly. Sometimes it prospered, and sometimes it waned. The local government should not interrupt the operation of fairs, and let things take their course. Most of rural fairs belonged to small markets, and its scope was not more than round trip in one day. The exchange in the rural fairs were primarily the distribution of resources (surplus rice especially) among small producers. Therefore, it consolidated self-sufficient natural economy. William Skinner started from analysis of commodity exchange in rural fairs, and tried to construct a hierarchy of markets in late imperial China. It should be noted that his concept of standard market town made readers confused. It is not proper that William Skinner equated market town with rural fair when he analyzed the characteristics of rural standard market. In fact, large numbers of standard market spread all over the countryside, not in towns. Although William Skinner mentioned small fairs, he underestimated the real status of rural regular fairs. Some Chinese scholars are similar in remarks concerning standard market to William Skinner. Their ideas about fairs in the lower reaches of the Yangze River may be reasonable, but it is not correct and proper to discourse these views nationwide. Strictly speaking, in the lower reaches of the Yangze River where commodity economy was most developed in China, its primary market in the countryside was still regular fair or everyday fair. However, towns boomed here. By contrast, fairs were not seductive like other places and replaced by town gradually.

All of regular fairs had their opening time in one county, maybe on the 2nd and 8th day monthly, on the 3rd and 9th day, on 1st and 6th day, on 2nd and 7th day, on 4th and 9th day, on 5th and 10th day, or every ten days, or every two months. The opening time among fairs was different. This arrangement was convenient for people to go to market and commodity circulation. In this case, the primary markets in rural society were full of flexibility and vigor. The periodicity of rural fairs was related to fluidity of individual merchant, indefiniteness of economic role, finiteness of average demand, transport level, etc. Fuliang county of Jiangxi in that Jingdezhen existed seems to be the exception. As a whole, the rural market in Fuliang County was Market Street primarily. In market hierarchy here, Market Street belonged to category of rural fair, and town situated upon it. Market street played the role of intermediary agent of commodity circulation between Fuliang county and Jingdezhen. However,

Market Street had not opening time, and its trade was conducted by shops, because staple trades in kiln firewood and porcelain clay were not conducted in Market Street. The fact was that great houses controlled the trades and transported commodity to Jingdezhen directly. In Fuliang County, Market Street was mostly a biggish village, and the power of gentry was strong as Chu Chiang Delta.

In general, Xu existed in backward area (especially in regions inhabited by ethnic groups) where traffic was inconvenient and economy was underdeveloped, in order to make up for lack of deficiency of large and medium-size towns and atrophy of market mechanism relatively. The sizes of trade in Xu were different. The spectacle of some Xu was massive where thousands of people swarmed, like as Fangyuan Xu and Zhenhe Xu in Guiyang state of Hunan, Shanmuqiao in Cili county of Hunan. Trading limit of Xu went beyond one county frequently and covered some counties, such as Jieshan Xu in Jishui County of Jiangxi and Dutouan Xu in Haiyang county of Guangdong. Several Xu became multi-provincial grote markets because of their advantaged geographic factor and irreplaceable commercial standing, such as Zhiliao Xu in Wuchuan county of Guangdong, Tangjiang Xu, Yinqian Xu and Junmenling Xu in mountain area of south Jiangxi. From this, it can be seen that commercial radiometric force of rural fairs was powerful. These super rural fairs (included super temple fairs in rural society) were not classified as regional market center, and the reason are listed as follows: firstly, they were the trading sites temporarily; secondly, there were any settled commercial families here. However, the appearance of this kind of market indicated that there were also abnormal super markets in city and countryside's marketing systems, besides normal market types. Specifically speaking, there were super fair and town in rural marketing system, meanwhile there were super fair and metropolis in urban marketing system. Of course, the super markets of different types in city and countryside were few, exceptional and untypical. They were individual cases and represented the highest-level of all markets only. By contrast, the numerous ordinary markets were universal, and were of typical significance in the category of regional economies.

It was worth noting that the opening time of some adjacent Xu in western Hunan was same, but not as causes as people have thought, namely the arrangement manner of opening time was to keep opening time of adjacent markets from collision and competition between them, and enable peasants to trade every day. William Skinner believed that the distributive principle of opening time was to avoid conflicts between a primary market and adjacent higher-level markets as much as possible, and did not consider the opening time of adjacent primary markets at all. So, the opening time of adjacent primary markets was same frequently, and there was no conflict in arrangement of opening time between a middle market and any primary market under it. William Skinner agreed with opinions of Yangqinkun, namely a middle town was not only the biggish center of intermediate marketing system, but also the lesser center of basic-level marketing system. In many areas where there were two fairs every ten days, the middle town adopted dual systems of opening time: fixed two days (such as 1st day and 6th day monthly) were called as small market, and the rest two days (such as 3rd day and 8th day monthly) were called as large market. The middle town played the part of primary market during the period of small market, and acted the role of intermediate market when the large market came here. This arrangement which tried to avoid collision of opening time was for meeting the demands of celebrities and merchants mainly, not for peasants' convenience, because peasants went to middle market occasionally. The arrangement of opening time of Ningbo and its hinterland confirmed William Skinner's opinion as well.

The temple fair was one of regular fairs and based on the principle of offering sacrifices to gods. Followed the rituals at temple fairs, all kinds of performance (such as traditional opera, acrobatics, etc.), trade and business were also took place. In a sense, the temple fair was exactly a commodity fair. By contrast with general rural fair, the temple fair's time was longer, its commodity classification was more complete, its population density was higher, and its synthesized function was more prominent. Not only did the temple fair meet the daily necessities of peasants, provide a variety of capital goods, but it did satisfy the luxurious needs of upper class including gentry, officials, rich businessmen, etc.

The transaction of capital goods was the major content of rural temple fairs, such as domesticated animals, farm implements, seeds, etc. Therefore, the temple fair was often held before spring ploughing, or after autumn harvesting. For examples, the temple fair of the King of Medicine existed in Jiangjiazhuang of Pinyin County in Shandong, and it held every April of the lunar calendar. In Jiaqing reigning years of the Qing Dynasty, there were twenty-one temple fairs in Yucheng county of Shandong, and sixteen temple fairs among them were situated in countryside. In Guangxu reigning years of the Qing Dynasty, the trade of rural temple fairs in Yuncheng county of Shandong was prosperous: there were nine temple fairs in eastern villages a year, nine in western villages, thirteen in southern villages, ten in northern villages, and they mostly held from February to April or from September to November of the lunar calendar. It is reported that Lunpuhui of Henan in Qing Dynasty was one of rural temple fairs. It held often in spring and autumn, corresponded with custom of

Qiguchunshe and Qiuxhebaocheng, and was in keeping with law of agricultural production. Specially, it held from February to April of the lunar calendar intensively, and satisfied the peasants' needs of purchasing farm implements and seeds during spring ploughing, and purchasing foodstuffs during shortage period. Shuangyanghui in south bank of Taihu Lake arisen in the middle period of Qing Dynasty, and was the peculiar one of rural temple fairs. It centered on towns of silk industry such as Zhenze, Nanxun and Shengze, and held every ten years. When it held, a myriad of businessmen came together and made a great flutter. Besides the lower reaches of the Yangze River, the temple fairs' function of commodity circulation in the middle reaches of the Yangze River was also noticeable.

On the whole, the network of rural fairs began to take shape in the most regions from Qianlong to Daoguang reigning years of the Qing Dynasty. This network was coordinated with commercial cities and towns, communicated markets of city and countryside, and became the component part of national system of commodity circulation. It was foundation of long-distance carrying trade, and was significant link of ensuring that small-scale peasant economy was in working order.

3. Professional Market

The professional markets in rural society included two kinds: professional town and professional fair. In the same economic region, they matched along with urban professional markets.

The professional town was the important researching object for studying towns, and it involved the matters of professional market's growth in countryside. There was a high degree of specialization in rural society for many centuries. Chinese peasants had no intention of producing all of goods they needed. They concentrated all their energies towards few products, and acquired the rest goods through trade. This kind of trade existed mostly in towns before the 20th century. The major way of deals in towns of the lower reaches of the Yangze River was different from that in rural fairs of interior areas. The uppermost business of former was to purchase textiles which produced by farm sidelines. The purchasers were travelling merchants who had plenty of money, and they did business with individual farmers who engaged subsidiary production by the help of local brokerage firms. As for the latter, both buyer and seller was private investor. Rice market developed in towns of the lower reaches of the Yangze River simultaneously with business of purchasing textiles, and lots of farmers were specialized gradually. With regard to current research of rural specialization (focused on textile industry) in the late imperial China, see also Libozhong's study of early industrialization in the lower reaches of the Yangze River.

The term of professional town means one that centered on producing or selling first category of commodities or some categories of commodities. So, the professional markets of town-level included professional market of town, or several markets which engaged in some transactions on a large scale in a town. In late imperial China, the professional towns could be divided into two kinds: one focused on domestic industry, other focused on commodity circulation. In fact, the professional town of domestic industry also engaged in merchandising. Therefore, it was the same as professional town of commodity circulation basically. The emergence of professional towns developed into certain result of stage of commodity economy. It indicated that town economy in a region got into scale economy, and its level of marketization was higher.

The concept of professional town was first raised by Fuyilin, and used by many scholars, most especially in the field of town research of the lower reaches of the Yangze River. In this region, the most important professional towns were those: the first focused on cotton and cotton cloth, the second focused on silkworm, mulberry and silk fabrics, and the third focused on rice. Besides, there were about sixteen types of professional towns that involved salt, oil manufacture, writing brush, Mining and Metallurgy, pottery, fishery, knitwork, mountain produce, embroidery, tobacco, trolley, shipbuilding, and shipping. The trait of town development in this region was specialization of towns in rural society which reflected on commodity circulation and emergence of capital goods' market. Especially the latter symbolized the gradual furtherance of specialization. The professional market of this region centered on these professional towns, spread to vicinity, and covered vast areas of specialized production. Among numerous views, the opinion of Chenzhongpin is surely heuristic for analyzing town market of specialization. Based on scale of trade site and gradation of trading relation, Chenzhongpin pointed out, there were the professional markets of towns in the lower reaches of the Yangze River. He highly recognized the market position of professional towns by integrating them into category of advanced market.

In general, the famous professional towns in the lower reaches of the Yangze River were listed as follows: the towns of cotton textiles such as Zhujinzen, Fengjinzen, Sanlintangzen, Zhudizhen, Zhujiajiaozen, Huangduzhen, Nanxiangzen, luodianzen, Jiangwanzen, Dachangzen, Zhangliantangzen, Hewangshi, Meilizhen, Zhitangzen, Huashuzhen, etc.; the towns of silk fabrics such as Zhenzezen, Shengzezen, Wangjiainzen, Nanxunzen, Wangdianzen, Puyuanzen, Wuqinzen, Linghuzhen, Shuanglinzen,

Linpinzhen, Tangxizhen; the towns of pottery such as Shushanzhen, Qianjiayaozhen, Lutouzhen, Pinyaozhen, etc.; the towns of commodity circulation such as Luoshezhen, Hushuzhen, Fengqiaoshi, Pinwangzhen, Liuhezhen, Zhapuzhen, Fushanzhen, etc.; the towns of mountain produce such as Shanmaizhen, etc. On the whole, the geographical position of these professional towns was in accordance with economic regions of specialized production such as the areas of rice and cotton growing, the areas of silkworm and mulberry cultivating, the areas of bamboo, wood, tea, paper, charcoal manufacturing.

Besides the lower reaches of the Yangze River, there were also many professional towns in other regions such as the middle reaches of the Yangze River. Let's try to compare them. On the part of professional towns' constitute, there were the towns of domestic industry, the towns of commodity circulation and professional markets of Xu in both regions. Comparatively speaking, the towns of domestic industry and commodity circulation in the middle reaches of the Yangze River were pale before ones in the lower reaches of the Yangze River on the whole. But, the former's professional markets of Xu were very flourishing and surpassed the latter in the level of development. By comparison, the development condition of professional towns in the middle reaches of the Yangze River looked like a bottle gourd, namely few large-scale professional towns expanded rapidly, and occupied the leading status across China. Meanwhile, the growth of small and medium professional towns was stunted, and the number of them was few. In the lowest tier of marketing system, rural fairs were numerous and played an important part in regional market network. The development condition of professional towns in the lower reaches of the Yangze River looked like a cylinder, namely all kinds of professional towns symbolized a trend of balanced development.

How big was the market circle of a professional town probably? Let's take Nanxunzhen as an example and try to explain this problem briefly. This town was an important center of commodity circulation, especially involving silk, cotton and cotton cloth. From the historical record, we can deduce that there might be over 50km in trade radius of this town. In that range, there were many rural primary markets which had different division of labor, and they were the commercial hinterland of Nanxunzhen.

Touching on professional market in rural society, we do not omit professional Xu. It was not true that all of Xu possessed their professional markets. But, accompanied by historical change, there were really professional markets which had local distinguishing feature in several Xu, just like silk Xu and silkworm fair in south of the five ridges, grass cloth Xu in mountain area of south Jiangxi, etc. The feature of specialization was also prominent in several rural temple fairs such as stock market of temple fair. This type of market was different with that in ordinary villages: the former was both retail market and wholesale market, and its dealers were mainly merchants. By contrast, the dealers of the latter were peasants principally.

The emergence of professional markets in rural society was the inevitable result of enlargement of cash crops planting and development of social division of labor, and helped in the shaping of specialized region which centered on cash farming.

4. Conclusion

Rural market was necessary for implementing reproduction of small-scale peasant economy. In late imperial China, all of the commodity production including grain crops, cash crops and cottage industry of peasants were developed. So, rural market played a significant role in peasant's life. However, the stagnation of technology in traditional society of China should be attributable to population growth and intensive markets. The increasing markets stimulated the development of manual textile industry of farmers' family. The reason for this condition was that peasants needed only little investment, purchased simple implements, engaged in spinning in the home by exploiting idle labor, and then sold their produces in primary market regularly. Peasants thought it was profitable, only selling price surpassed costs of raw material and tools. At the same time, due to there were lots of peasants to sell textiles in primary market, the merchants or brokers of cotton fabric could purchase the goods they needed at a low price. So, they believed it unnecessary to invest and create spinning-mill, and supervised production personally. If this happened, then separation between market and manufacturing technique came into being, namely merchants gave attention to operating condition of market rather than technique improvement and production operation. There were complicated historical causes for rural markets which were long-standing and ever-increasing in late imperial China. It has still many problems need to be studied for all of us.

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Notes

Note 1. The concept of late imperial China in this paper refers to the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Note 2. As for this statement in detail, please see also *General History of Market in China* which edited by Wuchengming and in press.