

# THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS FOR ENHANCING THE MARKET ACCESS OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS FROM CHANTHABURI PROVINCE TO CHINA

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## Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the demand for organic agricultural products from Chanthaburi Province in the Chinese market and to determine the appropriate communication process for promoting these products. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary data collection tool. Data was collected from 22 key informants, who were purposively selected, consisting of Chinese entrepreneurs, farmers, local administrators, and experts. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis and triangulation for validation. Key findings indicated that the Chinese market prioritized safety, international standard certification, and product traceability for organic agricultural products. Furthermore, market demand was rapidly expanding to organic processed products beyond fresh fruits. The research concluded that an effective communication process required an integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy, emphasizing the use of technology for transparency, and essential communication with the government based on clear policies and simple mechanisms. Success in penetrating the Chinese market relied on a strategy that combined high production standards with comprehensive communication, necessitating close collaboration between the private and public sectors.

**Keywords:** *Organic Agriculture, Chanthaburi, Chinese market, communication process, IMC.*

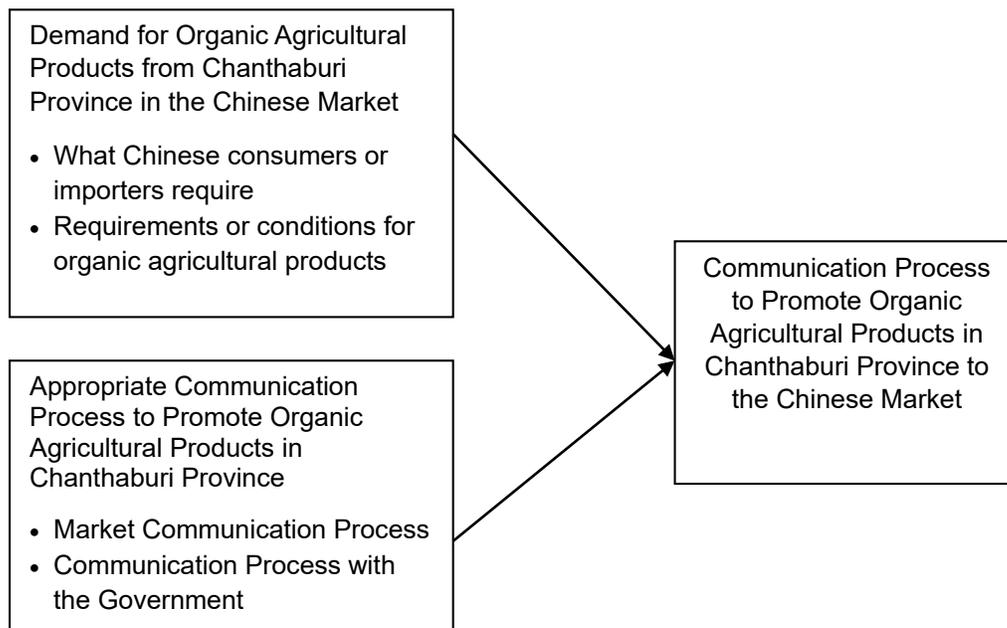
## Introduction

The agricultural industry faces a major challenge from excessive chemical use, leading to extensive negative impacts on consumer health, environmental contamination, and critical damage to the export economy. This chemical crisis has hurt Thailand's global image as a major food exporter. Consequently, organic agriculture has become an urgent strategy for building food security and sustainability. The global organic market is substantial (3.71 trillion Baht), and Thailand is among the top five organic producers worldwide. This transition aligns with key government strategies, including the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022) and the National Organic Agriculture Development Strategy (Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, 2017).

Chanthaburi Province, a crucial strategic area where agriculture accounts for 55.40% of the Provincial GPP, is a major source of economic fruits. However, the export sector faces direct pressure from the Chinese market, its primary partner. After 2018, China significantly increased inspections, issuing over 1,000 warnings regarding fresh durian and strictly enforcing GAP and GMP standards. This pressure confirms that the transition to a chemical-free organic system is an urgent necessity to maintain export competitiveness. Achieving this goal requires an effective communication process (Somwang Inchai, 2010) to build awareness and cooperation among farmers. Despite widespread interest, literature shows a lack of research focusing specifically on communication guidelines for promoting organic agriculture among Chanthaburi's fruit growers targeting the Chinese market.

This research has the following objectives: 1) To study the demand for organic agricultural products from Chanthaburi Province in the Chinese market; and 2) To study the appropriate communication process to promote these products to the Chinese market. The findings are expected to provide practical strategies for farmers, entrepreneurs, and government agencies to sustainably enhance the international competitiveness of Thai organic agriculture.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** Research Conceptual Framework for the Communication Process to Promote Organic Agricultural Products in Chanthaburi Province to the Chinese Market

## Research Objectives

1. To study the demand for organic agricultural products from Chanthaburi Province in the Chinese market.
2. To study the appropriate communication process to promote organic agricultural products in Chanthaburi Province to the Chinese market.

## Literature Review

This research is based on three main concepts: 1) Communication Process Theory, focusing on Berlo's SMCR model (1966), which analyzes the components of the Source, Message, Channel, and Receiver; 2) Communication Management (Suraphong Sothanasathian, 2017), which considers the administration of the communication process across four dimensions: environment, input, transformation process, and output ; and 3) Organic Agriculture Concepts, covering the four principles (Health, Ecology, Fairness, Care) (Tawan Hangsungnern, 2014) and organic standards requirements (Wilailak Sukhsai, 2014). The conceptual framework of this research integrated these concepts to analyze how the communication process (marketing communication, communication with the government) could respond to the demands and conditions of the Chinese market.

Furthermore, the literature review found several studies focusing on the communication process in different contexts, such as crisis communication (Chadsuda Wongsawarn, 2005) or communication for relationship building (Anawat Meekleub et al., 2017). However, the study significantly aligning with the context of this research was Nattanan (2017), who studied the Communication Strategy to Promote Participatory Organic Agriculture in Ban Chamrung Community, Rayong Province. That study found that the community faced three main problems: production, marketing, and labor, leading to farmers' attitudes that organic farming was complicated, yielded low productivity, and was risky. Nattanan (2017) therefore identified three communication strategies to address these issues: the Ugly Duckling Strategy, which emphasizes the advantages of organic produce, safe even if not aesthetically pleasing; the Fear Strategy, to manage the risk from middlemen; and the 1 Orchard 1 Tree Strategy, to easily encourage farmers to start experimenting.

## Research Methodology

This research was qualitative, using in-depth interviews with a purposively selected group of 22 key informants. The key informants were divided into four main groups: 1) Chinese organic agricultural entrepreneurs in Chanthaburi Province (10 Chinese entrepreneurs); 2) organic farmers in Chanthaburi Province (3 farmers); 3) local administrators in Chanthaburi Province (3 administrators); and 4) experts or academics in communication process and marketing, and local organic agriculture wisdoms (6 experts). The researcher analyzed the interview data descriptively and used method, data, and theoretical triangulation to verify the data's credibility.

## Research Results

The results for Objective 1 show the Chinese market's highest priority is product safety, international standards, and certification, aligning with China's strict regulations. Importers require clear certifications (e.g., Organic Thailand, MoAC standards), and premium consumers are willing to pay high prices for complete traceability, expecting Chinese labels and a QR Code scannable to the cultivation source. Market demand is also rapidly expanding beyond fresh fruit to organic processed products (e.g., freeze-dried durian, dried mangosteen). This aligns with data showing Thailand was the leading exporter of dried fruit to China in 2024 (valued at 125.64 million USD), in a market projected to grow to 335.3 billion Yuan by 2028, with 82% of Chinese consumers prioritizing health. Grade A fruits like Mon Thong durian and mangosteen, harvested at peak times, are in highest demand.

However, meeting this demand faces several challenges. Production must adhere to international standards (GIIP), prohibit synthetic chemicals, and rely on biological methods. Farmers must maintain detailed records for traceability and establish an Internal Control System (ICS). Key obstacles for farmers include a lack of specific knowledge, capital, and community cooperation. The primary economic challenge is a significant yield reduction (20-50%) during the transition, compounded by higher labor costs from manual management. While high market demand offsets this (consistent with Crowder, 2015, who found 10-18% lower yields led to 22-35% higher net profits), farmers still face structural risks from the market control of "Lhong" (Chinese middlemen).

The results for Objective 2, regarding the appropriate communication process, found that success required an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy that was more complex than mere advertising. The first crucial factor was Knowledge, where farmers and entrepreneurs must understand how to systematically integrate tools including advertising, public relations, and sales promotion. The second factor was Technology. Communication must utilize modern tools such as smartphones and the internet for storytelling, such as live broadcasts from the farm or presenting a transparent production process, to build consumer trust. The third factor was Cost Management, which included the cost of media production, such as photography, and social costs, such as travel and participation fees for trade shows, to build a reliable business network. Beyond marketing communication, the research found that Communication with the Government was a decisive factor for farmer group success. First, farmers needed access to clear government policies regarding both funding and training. Second, the government's system and mechanism must be designed to be accessible, uncomplicated, and modern to close the operational gap. The last factor was Sincerity from the Government, meaning the transparency and genuine intent of officials would build trust, a crucial foundation for farmers to communicate problems and cooperate in sustainable development.

## Conclusion

Regarding the demand of the Chinese market, the research findings show that Chinese consumers place extreme importance on health and safety. This aligns with consumer behavior theory (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019), which explains that purchasing decisions are highly influenced by personal values. This

approach strongly corresponds to the findings of Nattanan (2017), who studied an organic farming community in Rayong Province and proposed the Ugly Duckling Strategy. This is a communication strategy focusing on the benefit of safety over aesthetics, directly addressing consumers' health values. Additionally, the market's expansion into online channels and the processing of innovative products reflect the necessity for entrepreneurs to apply the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Kotler & Keller, 2016) to build a credible image. At the same time, the research also found significant obstacles from producing farmers, namely a lack of knowledge and concern about the risks involved in transitioning from chemical agriculture. This can be explained by the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), which suggests that the adoption of an innovation will be slow if users are not yet confident in the clear benefits or still perceive high risks. This point was empirically confirmed by Nattanan (2017), who found that the primary attitudes hindering farmers were viewing organic farming as complicated, yielding low productivity, and being risky. Furthermore, the structural challenge posed by the "Lhong" groups reflects the Structure-Conduct-Performance (SCP) Model (Bain, 1959), which indicates that a semi-monopolistic market structure affects competitive behavior (price control) and leads to risks borne by the farmers. This middleman problem is so significant that Nattanan (2017) proposed the Fear Strategy as a communication tool specifically to manage risks from middlemen. The research results reinforce the importance of the IMC strategy (Kotler & Keller, 2016) and the application of Digital Marketing (Strauss & Frost, 2014) to build transparency. The issue of farmers needing government support directly aligns with the Development Communication Model (Quebral, 2012). Nattanan's finding (2017) proposing the "1 Orchard 1 Tree Strategy" to easily encourage farmers to start experimenting is also a concrete example of development communication (Quebral, 2012) and reducing the risk in innovation adoption (Rogers, 2003). In summary, the entire communication process can be explained by the SMCR Model (Berlo, 1966), as the research found communication failure when there was an inconsistency between the Channel and the Receiver.

Based on this research, it is recommended that to sustainably export Chanthaburi's organic products to China, product innovation should be accelerated to meet Chinese consumer demand for new and healthy items. A transparent traceability system must be urgently established, allowing consumers to verify the product's source to build credibility. Additionally, sales channels should be expanded through Chinese online platforms (such as Tmall, JD.com, and Douyin) to increase customer access. Furthermore, future research should study Chinese consumer behavior more deeply to accurately define marketing communication strategies. Research should also compare the long-term economic returns of organic agriculture versus chemical agriculture to evaluate its worth and examine how modern communication technology impacts consumer trust in organic products.

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