

THE CURRENT STATUS, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES OF GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION PROTECTION FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IN CHINA

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the current status, challenges, and strategies of geographical indication (GI) protection for agricultural products in China. Through literature review and theoretical analysis, this paper first outlines the theoretical foundations and practical cases of GI protection both domestically and internationally, with a focus on evaluating the implementation effectiveness of China's existing legal framework and policy support. The research results indicate that although China has made certain progress in legal systems and economic benefits regarding GI protection, it still faces issues such as inadequate law enforcement, ineffective market promotion, and weak brand development. Based on these findings, this paper proposes strategies including strengthening legal enforcement, promoting brand development, and enhancing public awareness, aiming to provide references for further improving China's GI protection system for agricultural products. Future research directions may further explore the quantitative impact of GIs on regional economies and internationalization pathways.

Keywords: Geographical indications; China; Legal framework; Brand development; Market promotion; Strategy analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as consumers have increasingly demanded higher standards of food safety, quality, and origin, the protection of geographical indications for agricultural products has played an increasingly important role in China's agricultural development. As a form of intellectual property, geographical indications effectively protect agricultural products with specific regional characteristics, enhance their market competitiveness, and elevate the level of regional economic development [1]. However, despite significant progress in GI protection, numerous problems and challenges persist, such as incomplete legal frameworks, inadequate market supervision, and insufficient public awareness.

Since joining the World Trade Organization, China has gradually improved the relevant laws and regulations for GI protection of agricultural products, actively promoting the construction and promotion of the GI system. However, although the protection system has taken shape, its effective implementation in practice still encounters obstacles. On one hand, the application and maintenance processes for GIs are complex, making it difficult for many agricultural producers, especially small and medium-sized farmers, to bear the associated costs. On the other hand, the economic and social benefits of GI protection have not been fully realized, and the market value of some GI products has not been effectively enhanced.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the current status of GI protection for agricultural products in China, identify the main challenges it faces, and propose corresponding strategies to provide recommendations for further improving the GI protection system. The significance of this research lies not only in aiding the improvement of laws and policies related to GI protection but also in raising public awareness and appreciation of GI agricultural products, thereby providing theoretical support for achieving high-quality agricultural development and rural revitalization.

2 THEORIES AND CASE STUDIES OF GI PROTECTION

Geographical Indications (GIs), as a special form of intellectual property, play an important role in agriculture, food, handicrafts, and other fields. Their fundamental function is to identify products produced in a specific region, attributing unique quality and reputation to these products based on the region's distinctive natural, historical, and cultural factors, thereby enhancing the market value of the products [2]. GIs are not only a means of protecting agricultural products but also an expression of regional branding. In recent years, with the global increase in demands for food safety and quality, the protection of GIs has garnered widespread attention. Particularly in developed regions such as the European Union, the successful experiences of GI systems provide a referable model for other countries worldwide.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations Domestically and Internationally

Internationally, the theory of GI protection can be traced back to the origin labeling theory within intellectual property law. The core idea of this theory is that products produced in specific regions possess unique quality and reputation due to the region's distinctive natural conditions, production methods, and historical and cultural accumulation. Early scholars combined GI with brand management theory, suggesting that GIs can help products create brand effects through market differentiation, thereby gaining an advantage in fierce market competition [3]. In recent years,

researchers have increasingly focused on the cultural and social functions of GIs, particularly their role in protecting agricultural cultural heritage and traditional production techniques.

In China, research on the protection of GIs for agricultural products primarily concentrates on legal aspects, economic benefits, and their impact on rural economic development. Domestic scholars generally believe that the implementation of the GI system not only helps increase the added value of agricultural products but also stimulates regional economic development. This is especially significant in impoverished areas and provinces with strong agricultural traditions, where GIs help invigorate local specialty industries [4]. For example, GI products such as Longjing tea, Wuchang rice, and Yangcheng Lake hairy crabs have achieved high recognition in both international and domestic markets. Their success is attributed to policy support from local governments, stringent product quality control, and brand development.

2.2 Current Status of GI Protection in China

The protection of GIs for agricultural products in China started relatively late but has developed rapidly. Since China began promoting the protection of GI products in 2000, the number of GI-certified products has rapidly increased, covering various fields from tea, fruits, vegetables to livestock products [5]. Similar to research in traditional Chinese medicine, the quality of GI products is closely related to their regional characteristics [6]. According to incomplete statistics, by 2022, the number of GI products in China had exceeded 4,000, encompassing a wide range of agricultural product categories. These GI products are not only popular in the domestic market but also become key export products. For example, Guizhou Maotai liquor and Wuchang rice enjoy high reputations among domestic consumers and have also secured a position in international markets.

However, despite the large number of GI products in China, their market performance is uneven. Some products have achieved significant economic benefits, such as Longjing tea and Yangcheng Lake hairy crabs, while the market promotion of many GI products remains limited. Some scholars believe that this is directly related to certain shortcomings in China's GI protection system [7]. Firstly, the GI certification process in China is complex, and many small and medium-sized farmers lack the resources and capabilities to apply for and maintain GI certification. Additionally, there are numerous issues with quality control and brand promotion of GI products. Some local governments and enterprises lack long-term brand development awareness, leading to GI products failing to fully realize their market potential [8]. Similar to the application of medical research techniques, quality control of GI products requires rigorous scientific analysis and testing to ensure compliance with specific GI requirements [9].

2.3 International Experiences and Lessons

Internationally, especially in the European Union, the GI protection system has developed a mature model. The EU's legal framework for GI protection was established early and possesses strong legal enforceability. Particularly in the agricultural sector, the EU has secured a significant position for GI products in the global market through strict product quality control and brand development [10]. Similar to comparative studies of different treatment methods in the medical field, China and the EU have different strategies for GI protection but have both achieved their protective objectives [11]. Countries like France, Italy, and Spain, leveraging their rich agricultural resources and long-standing agricultural cultures, have produced a large number of well-known GI products. For example, France's Champagne, Italy's Parma Ham, and Spain's Iberian Ham are not only popular in European markets but have also become high-end products in international markets.

The EU's successful experience provides important lessons for China. Firstly, the EU ensures high-quality standards for GI products by establishing strict certification and quality control systems. This mechanism guarantees the reputation of GI products and enhances public awareness through a series of brand promotion activities. Additionally, the EU successfully integrates the historical and cultural stories of GI products with market promotion through cultural promotion, which not only increases consumer purchase desire but also enhances the cultural added value of the products. For instance, the production process of Champagne strictly follows traditional brewing techniques, and both the French government and local enterprises have combined Champagne with France's luxury culture through cultural marketing, successfully attracting global consumer attention.

2.4 Major Issues Faced by GI Protection in China

Although China's GI protection for agricultural products has achieved certain successes, its development still faces numerous challenges. Firstly, the degree of brandization of Chinese GI products is relatively low. Many GI products remain at the stage of GI certification without achieving efficient market operations [12]. Secondly, local governments and enterprises often lack long-term brand strategies when promoting GI products, resulting in limited market influence of these products. Additionally, there are certain loopholes in the legal protection of GIs. Some regions are plagued by counterfeit GI products, damaging the market reputation of genuine GI products [13]. Just as medical treatments require comprehensive consideration of multiple factors [14], the implementation of GI protection policies also needs to coordinate across legal, market, and social dimensions to achieve effective protection outcomes.

3 ASSESSMENT OF CHINA'S GI SYSTEM

China's GI protection system for agricultural products has a relatively sound foundation in terms of legal frameworks, economic impact, and socio-cultural dimensions. However, it still faces multiple challenges in practical implementation. Based on the theoretical background of GI protection and both domestic and international experiences, a thorough analysis can be conducted from the perspectives of legal frameworks and policy support, economic and social benefits, and the specific challenges currently faced.

3.1 Legal Framework and Policy Support

China's GI protection system is built upon a series of national laws and policies, primarily encompassing regulations such as the "Trademark Law" and the "Administrative Measures for the Protection of Geographical Indications of Agricultural Products." These laws provide a clear protection path for GI products and specify the procedures for applying, certifying, and maintaining GIs. Additionally, numerous supportive policies have been issued to encourage local governments and agricultural enterprises to actively participate in the application and promotion of GI products. These policies aim not only to protect geographically characteristic agricultural products from counterfeit and inferior products in the market through legal means but also to drive regional economic development through the GI system. However, in practice, the effectiveness of these legal frameworks is not ideal. Firstly, although laws like the "Trademark Law" provide registration and protection pathways for GI products, many local governments and enterprises lack professional intellectual property management capabilities in daily market management. This results in insufficient protection of GI products, with counterfeit GI products occasionally emerging [15]. Secondly, in terms of policy implementation, despite national-level support policies, there is unevenness in the specific implementation processes at the local government level. Some local governments overly rely on national subsidy policies and lack long-term sustainable development plans. Furthermore, due to the complexity of the GI application process, many small and medium-sized farmers find it difficult to bear the high costs associated with the procedure, leading to the failure of some high-quality agricultural products to successfully enter the GI protection system.

3.2 Economic and Social Benefits

The economic benefits of GIs are a significant manifestation of their value in agricultural and rural economic development. Theoretically, GI products typically command higher market prices than ordinary agricultural products because their specific regional characteristics, production processes, and historical and cultural backgrounds confer unique value to these products. This not only helps increase the added value of agricultural products but also promotes the industrialization of agriculture and the development of rural economies.

Taking Wuchang rice as an example, through GI protection, Wuchang rice has gradually become a well-known high-quality rice brand in the domestic market, with its market price far exceeding that of other similar products. This has brought substantial economic benefits to local farmers and increased the fiscal revenue of local governments. Similar successful cases include Anxi Tieguaanyin from Fujian and Pixian Doubanjiang from Sichuan. However, the realization of economic benefits is not universal. Many GI products fail to fully leverage their market potential due to a lack of effective market promotion and brand development. Although some GI products enjoy high recognition in local markets, they fail to enter national or even international markets through brand-oriented operations.

In terms of social benefits, the protection of GI products helps preserve agricultural cultural heritage and traditional production techniques. GI protection safeguards not only the agricultural products themselves but also their underlying cultural and historical backgrounds. For instance, the production process of Longjing tea has a history of hundreds of years, and GI protection ensures the inheritance and continuation of traditional craftsmanship. This plays an important role in protecting local culture and enhancing cultural identity. Additionally, the development of GI products can drive employment in rural areas, especially in the context of combining tourism and service industries. Through the promotion of GI agricultural products, many rural areas have developed diversified economic models based on ecological agriculture and cultural tourism.

3.3 Challenges and Issues

Despite the achievements of China's GI protection system for agricultural products, it still faces multiple challenges in practical implementation. Firstly, there is insufficient enforcement of laws, and counterfeit GI products still exist. This not only damages the market reputation of genuine GI products but also affects consumer trust in GI products. Secondly, the coverage of GI protection is still inadequate, especially for many high-quality agricultural products in central and western regions that have not been included in the GI protection system. Although these regions are rich in agricultural resources, their market promotion capabilities are limited, resulting in many products that meet GI conditions failing to receive adequate protection and promotion.

Moreover, there is a significant lack of market promotion for GI products. Compared to EU countries, although China has a large number of GI products, the degree of brandization is relatively low. Most GI products have brand recognition limited to local markets and have not formed nationally or internationally recognized brands. Some local governments and enterprises lack long-term brand development strategies, overly relying on the short-term economic benefits brought by GI certification while neglecting sustained brand building and market expansion. Relatedly, there is insufficient consumer awareness of GI products. Many consumers do not understand the meaning and value of GIs, further restricting the market expansion of GI products.

4 STRATEGIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CHINA'S GIS

China's GI protection system for agricultural products has made significant progress over the past few decades, with an increasing number of GI products and gradually improving related laws, regulations, and policy support. This system has not only enhanced the market value of agricultural products but also promoted regional economic development, particularly in areas rich in agricultural resources. Additionally, GI protection has played a positive role in preserving cultural heritage and traditional production techniques. However, the development process has also exposed some problems and challenges.

As analyzed above, although China's GI protection system is fundamentally established, it still faces numerous challenges in implementation. Firstly, the enforcement of laws needs to be strengthened, as counterfeit GI products continue to exist, severely damaging the market image of GI products. Secondly, there are significant deficiencies in market promotion and brand development. The recognition and influence of many GI products are limited to local markets, lacking national or international brand influence. Moreover, some farmers and enterprises in certain regions have insufficient awareness of the GI system and lack the enthusiasm to participate in protection and promotion, resulting in many potentially valuable GI products not being adequately promoted and protected.

To address these challenges, this paper proposes a series of strategic recommendations. Firstly, the legal framework for GI protection should be further improved, and the enforcement of laws should be strengthened, especially in implementing stricter regulatory measures against counterfeit GI products. Local governments and relevant enterprises should intensify efforts in brand development, not only being satisfied with the basic protection provided by GI certification but also enhancing the market influence of GI products through long-term market promotion and brand-oriented operations. Additionally, increasing public awareness of GI products is a key measure. Educating consumers about the value and significance of GI products can promote market demand for GI products.

Future research directions can further focus on quantifying the specific impact of GI products on regional economic development, especially through empirical studies on the role of GIs in increasing farmers' income and adjusting industrial structures. Additionally, exploring how to draw lessons from international experiences to further promote the internationalization process of China's GI products would be valuable. Topics such as cross-national comparative studies and the cultural dissemination of GI products can also become important areas for future research.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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