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Article

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Research in Globalization

Provided in Cooperation with:

Elsevier

Suggested Citation: Song, Shangcong (2020) : Street stall economy in China in the post-COVID-19 era: Dilemmas and regulatory suggestions, Research in Globalization, ISSN 2590-051X, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 2, pp. 1-5,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2020.100030>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/330962>

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Street stall economy in China in the post-COVID-19 era: Dilemmas and regulatory suggestions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

COVID-19
Post-COVID-19 era
Regulatory Dilemmas
Street Stall Economy
China

ABSTRACT

To reboot the economy of China in the post-Coronavirus Disease-2019 (post-COVID-19) era, street stall economy revives yet is facing several dilemmas. This article analyses the rise and fall of street stall economy in China, followed by the discussion of regulatory dilemmas on street vendors' legal status, road administration, food safety, and environmental protection, respectively. The suggestions including places designation, training service and smart regulation are provided to solve the dilemmas.

1. Introduction

Street stall economy is an important part of informal economy (Reid et al., 2010). It refers to individuals offer goods or services for sale to the public without having a permanent built-up structure, but with a temporary static structure or mobile stall (ILO, 2013). There are six types of street stall economy in China. The first type is foods, which includes snacks, ice cream, fruits and vegetables, etc. The second one is clothing. The third type is presswork, including books, stationery, newspapers and so on. The fourth is second-hand goods like antiques. The fifth is daily necessities such as towels and torch lights, and the last type is specialized service such as watch repairing and cell-phone membrane putting up (Flock & Breitung, 2016; Hanser, 2016; Winter, 2017). The location of street vendors is influenced by potential customers, the existing competitors or complementary vendors, and the legislation and regulations (Flock & Breitung, 2016; Martínez et al., 2018; Reid et al., 2010). Recently street stall economy is making a comeback in China to reboot the coronavirus-stricken economy. Solving the regulatory dilemmas on street vendors' legal status, road administration, food safety and environmental protection in the post-COVID-19 era are highly topical issues (Liao & Shi, 2020; Liu, 2020). This article discusses these dilemmas by analyzing laws and regulations, and provides directions to regulate street stall economy more efficiently.

2. Rise and fall of street stall economy in China and regulatory dilemmas in the post-COVID-19 era

2.1. Street stall economy in China before COVID-19

The characteristics of street vendors are unique. Most street vendors tend to concentrate in areas of high population density such as transportation nodes, offering an easy access to a wide variety of goods and services in public space (Rogerson, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Also, they have the characteristics of mobility and flexibility. Being mobile, street vendors can move to the location with more pedestrians and less competitors, and find potential customers easily (Huang et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the street vendors are spatio-temporal flexible, which means they can practice irregularly and at their options (Huang et al., 2014; Swai, 2019).

Although street stall economy is highly active in China, it is not always supported by laws and regulations (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). In the pre-reform era from 1949 to 1977, the government considered street stall economy as the "tail of capitalist economy" and an urgent social problem left over from the old society (Zhang, 2004). It was then forced into cooperative groups and stores as part of the socialist economy (Huang et al., 2014; Liu, 2009). In 1978, Reform and Opening-up witnessed the street stall economy's re-emergence (Bannan, 1992; Yueh, 2009). Many peasants earned their living by

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making day trips into the city and selling aquatic products, beef and mutton, poultry and eggs, vegetables and other agricultural products (Li & Zhang, 1999). In addition, by the late 1970s, with the end of the decades-long “Down to the Countryside Movement” in which educated urban youth were sent to the remote rural areas to receive re-education from the poor, a large number of those youth decided to return to cities and find job opportunities. Forced by life, many of them engaged in street stall economy. The goods they sold were more diverse and cheaper than those in the state-driven market (Li & Zhang, 1999), attracting the middle-income customers due to the affordable price (Bhowmik, 2010b). From 1990 to the 21st century before COVID-19 appeared in China, however, street stall economy was an obstacle to protecting the city’s image, leading to strict regulations towards it (Xue & Huang, 2015). During the National Sanitary City Campaign in many cities, the street vending was seen as an undesirable behavior since street vendors occupied the high-traffic streets and roadsides, caused dirt and disorder, and were often in contravention of city regulations (Hanser, 2016). For public order and state control, the Urban Management and Law Enforcement, which called *Chengguan* in Chinese, made efforts to fine upon unlicensed street vendors (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Cross, 2000). Although not legally authorized to use force, *Chengguan* were responsible for the enforcement of ordinances relating to sanitation, traffic safety, urban construction and stopping illegal business (Caron, 2013).

2.2. Major regulatory issues raised in the post-COVID-19 era

In the post-COVID-19 era, however, street stall economy gains more support from the government to reboot the economy and support employment (China Daily, 2020a; Sekhani et al., 2019). During the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (NPC & CPPCC) in 2020, Premier Li praised Chengdu, Sichuan province, for generating 100,000 jobs overnight by setting up over 36,000 street stalls (He, 2020), which contributes to the alleviation of unemployment and economy recovery. According to statistics, up to June 2020, at least 27 cities, including Shanghai, Jinan, Suining and Pengzhou, had explicitly encouraged the development of street stall economy (Zhang, 2020). Aiming at taking social responsibility for economic recovery and seizing market share in the post-COVID-19 era, the leading e-commerce platforms, such as JD.com and Alibaba, also assisted the street vendors in inventory and financing support (Li, 2020).

To some extent, the legal status of street stall economy is not fully recognized yet, which is one of the dilemmas to regulate it in the post-COVID-19 era. The enforcement of laws, regulations and policies relating to road administration, street food safety and environmental protection also has dilemmas, including the balance between road administration and street vendors’ mobility, the gap between food safety and street vendors’ knowledge, the disparity between sanitation practice requirements and street vendors’ small investment, and the incompatibility between environmental protection standards and the street vendors’ operating reality.

3. Dilemmas on street vendors’ legal status

3.1. Lacking recognition of street vending as a legitimate economic activity

Street stall economy is not fully considered as a legitimate commercial activity (Bamhu, 2019; Onodugo et al., 2016). *Regulation on Individual Industrial and Commercial Households* (State Council, 2016) regulates that the people’s government of a province, autonomous region or municipality directly under the Central Government must formulate administration measures on street vendors without permanent business places. Therefore, street vendors’ legal status remains uncertain to some degree and may vary from province to province.

By-laws and ordinances made by urban authorities are mainly focused on street food vendors. For instance, *Provisions of Beijing Municipality on the Administration of Small-Scale Food Production and Marketing* (Standing Committee of Beijing Municipal People’s Congress, 2019) regulates the location and the types of food allowed to sell by street food vendors. *Measures of Beijing Municipality on the Supervision and Administration of Street Food Vendors* (Beijing Municipal Comprehensive Law-Enforcing Bureau of City Administration, 2013) focuses on strengthening the supervision and management of street food vendors and promoting their standardized operation. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to fully recognize the legal status of street vendors. For example, *Measures for the Investigation and Punishment of Unpermitted and Unlicensed Business Operations* (State Council, 2017b) regulates that the street vendors selling agricultural, sideline products and daily necessities do not require any permit.

3.2. Need for legal status and rights protection of street vendors

The implementation of laws, regulations and policies helps to protect the street vendors and integrate them into the urban life (Brown, 2017). Although the enforcement of the rules may not be always fair, attempts have been made to protect street vendors. *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China* (National People’s Congress, 2018) provides people’s right to choose profession, occupation, and trade freely subject to any law that imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right in the public interest. This supports the street vendors’ right to work. Furthermore, *Employment Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China* (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2015) also encourages the proper rights of workers to employ themselves, which implies the proper position of all types of street vendors should be recognized by laws and regulations.

4. Dilemmas on road administrative promotion

4.1. Difficulty to balance road administration and street vendors’ mobility

It is difficult to regulate the roadside occupation by street vendors. For example, occupying urban roads without authorization is prohibited by *Regulations on Administration of Urban Roads* (State Council, 2019). This regulation requires the use of the urban roads to be strictly managed and the distribution of the street vendors to be strictly controlled. Most of the street vendors, however, usually concentrate in areas of high population density such as transportation nodes and entertainment complexes (Rogerson, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). The vibrancy of street stall economy may be impacted when laws and regulations limit the location of the street vendors (Sun et al., 2020). This opinion is also supported by Reid et al. (2010), which proves ideal location is one of the most important elements to vibrate the street stall economy in Dalian, Liaoning.

Meanwhile, although street vendors are not fully encouraged (Bhowmik, 2005; Cross, 2000), they can quickly move to another place when they are asked to leave, and reopen their small business because of their mobility (Chen et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2014; Malefakis, 2019). This seems to be one of the reasons why street stall economy still exists even though laws and regulations on road administration regulate the use of the road strictly (Zhang & Zhang, 2008).

4.2. Vagueness in the regulatory enforcement

The implementation of road administration laws and regulations regarding street stall economy is lenient in the post-COVID-19 era in China. In other words, the management of street vendors is looser than that in the pre-COVID-19 era to stimulate the economy (CGW, 2020). The number of street vendors in many cities, such as Chengdu and Changsha, obviously increases in the post-COVID-19 era (He, 2020;

Wang, 2020). This situation to some extent implies that there are vague guidelines on when the road administration laws and regulations should be strictly followed to regulate street stall economy or loosely operated to thrive it. This vagueness has pros and cons. On the one hand, it can create room for maneuver and give the executors discretion so that the enforcement agency can take different measures based on different situations and different types of street stall economy (Liu, 2020). On the other hand, it may also lead to the uncertainty of the development of street stall economy due to the lack of a specific enough guidance on the implementation of the laws (Jin, 2010).

5. Dilemmas on regulating street food safety

5.1. Gap between food safety requirements and street vendors' knowledge

The enforcement of food safety laws and regulations relating to street stall economy has dilemmas. *Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China* (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2018a) provides that street food vendors must meet the food safety requirements and ensure the food is clean, nontoxic, and innocuous, which means street food vendors are under comprehensive control (Rane, 2011). Liu et al. (2015), however, shows that 94% of the street vendors have limited knowledge about the food safety. It is difficult for street food vendors to implement food safety requirements if they know little about it.

The following two elements may contribute to this situation: firstly, most of the street vendors (78%) are undereducated, as is shown in a study carried out in Shijiazhuang, Hebei (Liu et al., 2014). Secondly, the street food vendors do not have enough knowledge sharing on food safety (Li, 2016). In the post-COVID-19 era, food safety attracts more attention since in China COVID-19 outbreak in a wet market which offered perishable goods such as vegetables, fish, chicken and pork in Wuhan. Due to the close quarters and potentially unsanitary practice, wet markets may be under the dangerous conditions where viruses can spread from animals to humans (Westcott & Wang, 2020). A study carried out in Guangdong, however, showed that only 15.2% of the street food vendors knew about the pathogens and 31% of them were not aware that they were the first line for food safety protection (Liu et al., 2015). With lower education level and little knowledge sharing, some street vendors lack food safety knowledge and techniques, which leads to a distance to the food safety requirements provided in the food safety laws and regulations.

5.2. Disparity between sanitation practice standards and small investment

In the post-COVID-19 era, people express more concern about food safety (Zhou, 2020), and urban authorities take stricter surveillance on street food to prevent the spread of epidemic (State Administration for Market Regulation, 2020). Under this situation, the street food vendors ought to pay more attention to sanitary conditions.

The street food vendors in China, however, usually prepare their food in an open-air condition (Liu et al., 2014), which may cause the food to be contaminated by spoilage, hazardous chemicals or pathogenic micro-organisms (Chukuezi, 2010; Rane, 2011). In order to fill this gap, the street food vendors must improve sanitary conditions, such as updating garbage disposal facilities and anti-mosquito facilities, which will cost more money. Many street vendors, however, usually invest little since the barrier to the street stall economy is low (Huang et al., 2019). They may not want to or have no ability to deal with the high cost (Wang, 2018). As a result, it is difficult for the street food vendors to meet the sanitation practice standards.

6. Dilemmas on enhancing environmental protection

6.1. First-tier cities' reluctance to reboot street stall economy

Environmental laws and regulations also regulate street stall economy in China, especially in the post-COVID-19 era. For instance, *Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China* (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2014) and *Law of the People's Republic of China on Prevention and Control of Pollution from Environmental Noise* (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2018b) provide that street vendors are in duty bound to protect the environment and the acoustic environment. In addition, according to *Regulations on the Administration of City Appearance and Environmental Sanitation* (State Council, 2017a), street vendors are responsible for their own stalls' cleaning.

Some street vendors, however, may seek economic profit at the expense of their responsibility for environmental protection and public health (Hussain, 2019). This situation makes them be considered as a nuisance element to the urban environment. For example, many plastic bags, paper bowls, and other kitchen wastes were left on the streets or markets after the street vending activities in Dalian, China (Liao & Shi, 2020). The wastes rotting on the streets may not only cause air pollution, but also endanger stray animals' health if the animals are fed on the wastes. Thus, many first-tier city authorities in China have shown more objections to the reemergence of street stall economy in the post-COVID-19 era (Beijing Daily, 2020; Shenzhen Special Zone Daily, 2020). The gap between the environmental laws and the street vendors' imperfection on environmental protection may limit the development of street stall economy in China in the post-COVID-19 era.

6.2. Additional cost caused by garbage sorting policy

Some pilot cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, have carried out mandatory garbage sorting in efforts to protect the environment (China Daily, 2020b). Sorting trash contributes to improving the environment and recycling (Hyatt, 2019). This approach may cause an increase in street vendors' operating cost (Zhou, 2019). For example, the street food vending may produce recyclables, kitchen waste and other waste, so the street food vendors need to spend additional time and money sorting the garbage into different categories. The disparity between the high cost and street vendors' small investment exists again. In addition, some street vendors do not have a strong sense and knowledge of garbage sorting, which limits the level of environmental protection reversely.

7. Regulatory suggestions on solving dilemmas in the post-COVID-19 era

7.1. Designated places for street vending activities

Planning a place for street vending activities can help to thrive street stall economy. Compared with forcibly removing or fully liberalizing street stall economy, re-positioning the street vendors in designated places can play a better role in the development of street stall economy in the post-COVID-19 era (Bhowmik, 2010a; Huang et al., 2019). This strategy can help to increase the employment opportunity and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Zhao, 2020). Clear boundary permission zones and prohibition zones for the street vendors can balance the needs for street vendors' location choices and the urban road administration. For example, Thailand's capital Bangkok have installed hundreds of small public spaces as alternative spaces for street vendors (Boonjubun, 2017), avoiding their occupation of streets and sidewalks. This demarcated vending mode is worth learning because when located in the permission zones, the street vendors do not have to "play cat and mouse game" with the urban managers, which

can not only promote the stability of the street vendors but is also convenient for urban management (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). This does not necessarily mean the planning of designated places is a perfect solution. Instead, it also needs a long-term management to avoid commercialization and double registration which means the street vendors having a place at the designated zones may still operate their business on the streets (Huang et al., 2012).

Locating street food vendors in specially designed centers which provide common facilities including potable water, electric supplies and drainage to street food vendors is also a good way to enhance the food safety (Leong-Salobir, 2019; Sharath, 2016). For example, Singapore Hawker Centers marks the imposition of order and hygiene onto the street food vendors, which is a successful practice on relocation (Henderson, 2017). The street vendors do not have to bear the high facility cost and their operations will be more likely to meet the food safety requirements. Street vendors can supervise each other and may look after their vending place more carefully. Furthermore, garbage management will be easier when the street vendors have a comparatively more stable place for their business (Bhowmik, 2005).

7.2. Promoting knowledge sharing among street vendors

Sharing knowledge about street food safety among the street vendors plays a fundamental role in the development of street stall economy (Ma et al., 2019). It contributes to the street food vendors' food handling practices improvement, which further will reduce the incidence of food-borne diseases by contaminated street foods and promote food safety (Thanh, 2015). Also, a study showed that 92.4% of the street food vendors expected to receive food safety training (Liu et al., 2015). Knowledge sharing can be done together with licensing, regarding the hazards confronting the street foods, safe handling and food preparation, as well as good hygienic practice (WHO, 1996).

Knowledge sharing can help to benefit street vendors in developing their business. The food safety knowledge assists the street food vendors to meet food safety standards. Additionally, concerned with sanitation, vendors' knowing more about food safety is also helpful in keeping the vending site clean and well maintained for a longer term (Leitão et al., 2018), which is of great importance especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

7.3. Smart regulation as a regulatory instrument

The idea of smart regulation, which refers to a form of regulatory pluralism that pursues flexible, imaginative and innovative forms of social control, can be used to regulate street stall economy in the post-COVID-19 era (Gunningham & Sinclair, 2017). By encouraging street vendors to establish self-regulation associations, the government can share the regulatory burden with the street vendors, which can also help to achieve a higher regulatory flexibility and acceptance with the participation of different stakeholders (Van Gossum et al., 2012). Such street vendor associations can set rules and standards relating to the street vendors' behaviors. For example, the associations can provide a "grade card" to each street vendors, which shows their points in the environment inspection. If the point is below an average level, the street vendors need to pay more for garbage disposal. In these organizations, the street vendors can monitor each other, enforce laws and regulations as well as their associations' rules (Hummel, 2017).

In addition, in the context of smart regulation, the street vendors can engage in the policy making process (Van Gossum et al., 2010). The representatives from street vendor associations will play a leading part in the negotiations with the policymakers. They can test the suitability and take impact assessments to identify the gaps between laws and regulations and the street vendors' reality (McColm, 2011). For instance, when designating permission zones and prohibition zones, the street vendor associations can offer suggestions and express their demands on the location. They can also claim the gap between

the environmental protection standards and the additional economic costs, which will help the government to take into account the needs of street vendors more in policy-making process.

8. Conclusion

The revival of street stall economy is facing several dilemmas in China in the post-COVID-19 era. Efforts have been made to solve the dilemmas on street vendors' legal status. In addition, road administration, food safety and environmental protection laws and regulations also have dilemmas on regulating street stall economy. Firstly, to make a balance between road administration and street vendors' mobility, designated places for street vending activities can be provided. This regulatory method can also help to balance the sanitation practice requirements and street vendors' small investment. Secondly, assisting street food vendors with food safety knowledge is a good way to fill the gap between food safety standards and street vendors' sense and knowledge. The ideas of smart regulation and establishing street vendors' self-regulation associations can help to mitigate the disparity between environmental protection standards and street vendors' operating reality.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This article was supported by Shanghai Municipal Education Commission and Top Innovative Talents Training Program 2019–2020 of East China University of Political Science and Law, China. The author's sincere gratitude goes to the anonymous reviewers for the insightful comments and helpful suggestions. The author is also grateful to the colleagues who gave her guidance and suggestions during the writing of this article.

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