

China's farmers reap rich harvest through video-sharing apps

AFP, Hengzhong

"Do you want a piece?" beekeeper Ma Gongzuo says, looking into the camera of a friend's smartphone before biting into the dripping comb of amber-coloured honey.

The clip goes out to his 737,000 followers on Douyin, the Chinese version of popular video sharing app TikTok that has 400 million users in the country and has turned Ma into something of a celebrity.

Creating videos has become a popular sales tactic for Chinese farmers: the clips show increasingly discerning consumers the origins of the product and provide a window into rural life that captures audience imagination.

For some it has helped them find a way out of poverty, which the ruling Communist party hopes to eradicate by 2020.

"Everyone said I was good for nothing when they saw I'd come back," the 31 year-old says of his return to his village after a failed attempt at running an online clothing business.

"They tell us that we can only get out of poverty if we study and get a job in a city," he adds.

Today, Ma drives an expensive car and has already earned enough to buy property and help his parents and fellow villagers with their homes and businesses.

In 2015, Ma took on the family honey producing business in the verdant hills of Zhejiang province, and thanks to

e-commerce apps, managed to turn a yearly revenue of 1 million yuan (\$142,000).

But the sales began to stagnate. So in November 2018, with help from his friends in the village, he began posting videos about his life on the farm.

They showed him opening up a hive surrounded by a swarm of bees, swimming bare-chested in a river, and chopping wood.

"I never advertise my products. I show my daily life, the landscapes of the countryside. That's what interests people," Ma says.

"Of course people suspect that I'm selling honey. But they decide to get in touch with me to say they want to buy some." Like most transactions in China, where hard cash is less and less popular, the orders are paid through apps like WeChat or Alipay.

Ma says he now sells between 2 and 3 million yuan (\$285,000- \$428,000) worth of honey each year, as well as dried sweet potato and brown sugar.

"When I was young we were poor," he recalls, adding, "At school I used to admire other kids who had pocket money, because I never had any." Now he drives a 4x4 BMW that cost around 760,000 yuan (\$108,000) and has also invested in building a B&B.

"Using Douyin, that was the turning point," he says.

"Today I can buy my family what they need. I help the other villagers to sell their products too. All of the local economy benefits," he explains.



Chinese farmer Ma Gongzuo's assistant, left, using a mobile phone to take a video as Ma Gongzuo, centre, and his mother prepare to taste honey at his apiary in Songyang county in China's Zhejiang province.



MA Hassan, chairman and managing director of Aristopharma, attends its "Annual Sales Conference 2019" at International Convention City Bashundhara in Dhaka on January 2.

Musk hands over made-in-China Teslas to early buyers in Shanghai

AFP, Shanghai

Tesla CEO Elon Musk presented the first batch of made-in-China cars to ordinary buyers on Tuesday in a milestone for the company's new Shanghai "giga-factory", but which comes as sales decelerate in the world's largest electric-vehicle market.

The eccentric entrepreneur danced awkwardly, gave out high-fives, and mugged on a stage as sleek Model 3 sedans -- the company's mid-price, mass-market offer -- were driven up one by one and presented to buyers who jumped into the back seats before being driven away at the plant.

The factory is the company's first outside the United States and a key step forward in Musk's strategy of going global.

Musk said it was just the start of what will be a growing investment in China by the California-based electric-vehicle pioneer.

"We intend to continue making a significant investment and increasing that investment in China, making the Model 3 and the Model Y, and future models also in China," he said.

Musk, 48, said Tesla also planned to establish "a China design and engineering centre to actually design an original car in China for worldwide consumption." Tesla has said the multi-billion-dollar plant is producing more than 1,000 vehicles per week. It has already delivered a small batch of Model 3s on December 30 to employees who had pre-ordered them.

Those being driven away at Tuesday's event were the first for regular consumers.

The giga-factory is unusual for China, which typically requires foreign automakers to forge manufacturing joint ventures with domestic firms, which means sharing profits and technology with local partners.

But amid sustained US pressure on China to open its markets, that requirement was waived

for the Shanghai assembly line, which is wholly-owned by Tesla and believed to be the first to enjoy that status.

Musk has said that the plant would eventually have an annual production capacity of 500,000 vehicles, and has billed it as the solution to the company's perennial struggles with production delays and failure to keep up with demand.

Tesla's output woes in the US are easing however, with the company reporting that 2019 deliveries surged 50 percent year-on-year to 367,500. But China's auto market has slowed significantly since plans for the Shanghai factory began to take shape more than 18 months ago.

After surging to become the world's largest automotive market, sales fell last year for the first time since the 1990s amid a slowing economy, US trade tensions, and a Chinese

credit crackdown that has crimped car-financing channels.

Sales of "new-energy vehicles" such as electric models have particularly suffered, plunging nearly 44 percent in November, the fifth straight month of contraction, after the government slashed subsidies for such cars earlier last year.

A number of automotive analysts have said Tesla could struggle to measure up to Musk's promises for Shanghai output.

But at more than \$450 per share, Tesla's stock is at record highs, having more than doubled since June on improving output and earnings.

Morgan Stanley said in late December that Tesla shares were positioned for a "potential surge" through the middle of 2020 due to the Shanghai factory coming on line and other potentially positive catalysts.



Tesla CEO Elon Musk poses for photos with buyers during the Tesla China-made Model 3 Delivery Ceremony in Shanghai yesterday.

Bullet train for only Dhaka-Ctg route: PM

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Even, the maximum speed of the bullet train should not cross 200 kilometres per hour, he said. His comment was backed by the prime minister.

The feasibility study of the high-speed train, commissioned by the Bangladesh Railway, has already been completed.

The route has also been selected and work for the detailed design of the "passenger dedicated" railway project, involving around Tk 97,000 crore, is underway.

The journey from the capital to the port city will be slashed to only 73 minutes once the high-speed trains begin passenger services. An uninterrupted journey between Dhaka and Chattogram will take only 55 minutes. Now it takes around six hours.

A one-way journey will cost passengers around Tk 2,000, more than three times the fare of an AC seat on existing Bangladeshi inter-city trains.

The trains, which will run at a top speed of 300km/h, can carry approximately 50,000 passengers each way daily.

The planned high-speed railway route will be around 90km shorter than the existing route.

However, two prominent transport experts termed the project "highly ambitious" and questioned the capacity of the Bangladesh Railway to operate the high-speed train, when it has not yet introduced electric train.

Work for the detailed design of the project is expected to be completed in April, after which its development project proposal will be prepared.

Officials hope to place the project before the Ecnc by 2020.

Living in Dhaka became 6.5pc dearer last year

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The only respite for people was the fall in overall prices of rice, pulse, edible oil, sugar and soap in 2019 from the previous year.

Yet, the increasing house rent has put higher pressure on the poor and low-income people. "The lower the income, the higher the pressure of house rent on them," said Rahman, adding that the rent of a two-room shed registered the highest climb of 10 percent, followed by tin shed buildings.

The living standard of those consumers whose income did not increase deteriorated. "They have fallen in difficulty," he said.

Still, nearly two crore of Bangladesh's population are poor and the majority belong to the poor and low-income group, according to CAB.

"The increase in prices of commodities affect them," he said, while calling for the prices of goods and services to be contained to improve the standards of living of the poor. At the same time, steps should be taken so that their income grows.

Onion was the most talked about essential and its prices shot up as much as 50 percent year-on-year in 2019 from a year earlier, CAB said.

The prices of vegetables soared 81.3 percent with pointed gourd rising the most. At the event, CAB Energy Adviser Shamsul Alam said the prices of LPG cylinder were hiked again this month after increasing in November last year.

And the government plans to revise the law pertaining to increasing the prices of electricity and energy: the prices can be hiked any time of the year from once a year.

"We, the consumers, are victims of injustice in case of electricity and energy," he said, adding that CAB was against the hike in prices of electricity.

CAB said it presented data and argued against the move to increase prices in a hearing recently.

"Illogical hike in prices of electricity will have a negative impact on the economy and the lives of consumers," he said, adding that the prices of goods will increase, which will erode the competitiveness of Bangladesh's exports in the world market.

The CAB president also urged the government to take steps to improve the standard of medical care in Bangladesh by establishing a healthcare town and encouraging private and foreign investment there.

"When our higher ups will stop going abroad for treatment we will think that standards of healthcare have improved in Bangladesh."

Rahman also criticised the public hospitals for not using healthcare-related equipment and machines purchased by state money.

"It is unacceptable," he added. CAB General Secretary Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan was also present, among others.

Trade deficit tapering off

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"We should give our all-out effort to bring back the confidence of businesspeople for the greater interest of the economy."

Both exports and imports will turn around from the existing frustrating condition if businesses get back their confidence, he added.

The overall trade deficit in the first five months of fiscal 2019-20, however, were higher by \$28 million from a year earlier at \$6.68 billion.

"But the upward trend will not be sustainable if imports maintain the declining stance," Khatun said.

The deficit in current account balance, however, decreased more than half to \$1.09 billion in the first five months of the fiscal year due to a remarkable growth in remittance.

Between July and November this fiscal year, remittance inflows stood at \$7.71 billion, up 22.71 percent from a year earlier. This has brought relief for the government in management of the external sector of the economy, said a central bank official.

Inflation crawling up

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Sharp increases in prices of items like onions cannot explain the inflation trends because in early 2019 the country also experienced a collapse in rice prices, which occupy a much higher weight in the consumer basket, Hussain said.

With import growth lagging well behind GDP growth, the increase in cost of imports due to exchange rate depreciation can also not explain why the headline inflation in most months remained above 5.5 percent and non-food inflation closer to 6 percent.

"Clearly, the economy was overheating

with aggregate demand boosted by sharp increases in public sector borrowing and remittances. Supply chain disruptions such as strikes by transport operators may also have contributed to price spikes at different times of the year," Hussain said.

The cost of living rose 5.50 percent year-on-year and the prices of goods and service went up by 6.08 percent last year, the CAB said.

The government has targeted a 5.5 percent inflation rate for this fiscal year. It was able to contain it at 5.48 percent in fiscal 2018-19, which is comfortably below the target of 5.6 percent.

Dhaka airport to welcome Airbus A350-900 from Feb 1

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The A350-900 aircraft will replace existing A330 aircraft, which had 285 seats including 30 seats in business class.

Customers will have access to high-speed in-flight WiFi service on board the new A350-900.

The new A350-900 medium-haul aircraft is equipped with the airline's recently launched new regional business class and economy class cabin products: the business class cabin boasts a 1-2-1 seat arrangement, while the economy class cabin will be arranged in a 3-3-3 configuration.

The A350-900 will be fitted with the latest Thales AVANT inflight entertainment system. Designed with a new user interface that offers a more intuitive user experience and navigation options, customers will be able to enjoy Singapore Airlines' myKrisWorld personalised inflight entertainment now with even greater control.

The other features that Economy Class customers can look forward to including personal storage space for small personal items, a coat hook, USB port and in-seat power supply.

Address knowledge asymmetry with data

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He was addressing the plenary of a three-day "Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honouring Simeen Mahmud" organised by the BIGD at Brac Centre Inn.

There is a logical flow to her work looking at census and demographic data, trajectories of fertility and going on to the next phase of gender and labour markets, said Rehman Sobhan, chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

She was gently modest when pointing out big picture issues and a large number of young people accepted her as their guide, mentor and friend, he said while recalling taking her into employment at the BIDS.

Simeen believed that empowerment resulted from a combination of all variables, said Wahiduddin Mahmud, former adviser to a caretaker government. She pointed out time inconsistent preference, which is a decision-maker's preferences changing over time, by experimenting with staff who were unable to get out of loan cycles, he said.

Simeen always practiced and promoted

getting a feel for ground realities through visits before embarking on any research, he added.

She took ILO definitions seriously to find much higher levels of economic activity for women in agriculture, much of it home-based and market-oriented, a product of microfinance, said long time friend Naila Kabeer, who is a professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

She was free of much of the less attractive features of academics, such as an inflated ego, and she loved her work, brought joy out of it and enjoyed the collaborative nature of it, she said.

Simeen was tolerant of arguments and disagreements, willing to persuade and be persuaded, serious about life but ready to be amused and intellectually curious but empathetically engaged.

Relatively optimistic about the country's future, one thing that bothered her is society honouring and giving status to women working in offices but looking down on poorer women working out in the fields and on the streets,

Kabeer said.

Sajeda Amin, senior associate at Population Council; Nazneen Ahmed, senior research fellow at the BIDS; and Imran Matin, BIDG executive director, also spoke at the programme.

Ctg port ready for Indian cargoes: CPA chairman

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The eviction of illegal structures along the Karnaphuli river is an ongoing process, the CPA chairman said.

Illegal structures have been cleared from around 30 percent of the land in the first phase last year and 25 percent more area would be recovered in the second phase, he said.

He informed that the Chattogram port, Pangoan Inland Container Terminal, Kamalapur Inland Container Depot in Dhaka and the private off docks all together handled a total of 3.08 million TEUs of containers in 2019 with an annual growth of 6.34 percent.

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Head Office (annex.), General Services Division
Zahed Plaza (7th Floor), 30 North Gulshan Avenue, Gulshan 2, Dhaka 1212
Website: www.midlandbankbd.net

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