

Taiwan pork logic confuses the US

Written by Wu Hai-ruei 吳海瑞

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US pork exports grew by 45 percent between 2010 and last year, while those of US beef doubled. Average annual growth of US pork and beef exports during this period has been 4 percent and 8 percent respectively.

US pork has been available in Taiwan for more than 20 years, but because Taiwanese prefer domestically produced pork — freshly slaughtered without being refrigerated or frozen — home-grown pork has a 90.6 percent share of the market.

Out of 2.67 million tonnes of pork exported by the US last year, only a little more than 11,000 tonnes were shipped to Taiwan — a mere 1.2 percent of its pork market.

The Central News Agency reported that Taiwan Swine Association secretary-general Chang Sheng-chin (張盛欽) said: “US pork free of leanness-enhancing feed additives, which is allowed to be imported, only costs NT\$35 to NT\$40 per kilogram, which is close to half the NT\$60 to NT\$62 production cost of domestic pork.”

Evidently, the low cost of US pork does not give it an overwhelming advantage on the Taiwanese market, because it has only gained a small foothold after all these years.

From a marketing point of view, product differentiation — the preference for the flavor of Taiwanese pork and for fresh pork over frozen pork — has prevented US pork’s cost advantage from having an effect.

As a result, when Chang added that “if we were to import pork that contains leanness-enhancing agents, the price would be even lower, so it might have a greater impact,” what he said does not comply with marketing logic.

The Chinese Nationalist Party’s (KMT) rationale for opposing pork, but not beef, with traces of ractopamine, is that few Taiwanese eat beef, while most eat pork.

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This rationale is even less capable of standing up to scrutiny.

Beef produced in Taiwan only accounts for 5.3 percent of the local beef market, while US beef has the lion's share at 46.6 percent.

Last year, Taiwan imported more than 64,000 tonnes of US beef — almost three times as much as in 2012, which shows that Taiwanese favor US beef.

A calculation based on a local population of 23 million people shows that each person consumed an average of 3kg of US beef last year, compared with 500g of US pork — six times as much.

Considering that many people do not eat beef, but do eat pork, the real number is probably several times higher.

In other words, if one assumes that eating too much beef with traces of ractopamine has an adverse health effect, the main point of concern should be how much ractopamine these beef-lovers have accumulated in their bodies.

No wonder that people posted comments on the Professional Technology Temple bulletin board such as: "They found nothing worrying about ractopamine after eating tens of thousands of tonnes of US beef, but eight years later, when they suddenly want to oppose the Democratic Progressive Party [DPP], they tell me to worry."

Another user asked: "What sense does it make to say that you cannot eat pork with leanness enhancers, but when it is in beef, that is OK?"

With respect to trade, the main thing that the US cares about is keeping trade fair — fair for the

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US, that is.

At a time when Taiwan-US relations are warmer than ever and Taiwan is eager to sign a trade agreement, US pork has a tiny share of the local market and, by implication, a tiny impact on local pig farmers.

The ruling DPP has a high rate of support, while the opposition KMT opened the door to the importation of US beef with traces of ractopamine when it was in power.

Given these factors, the DPP and the KMT should not object to letting pork follow where beef went before, although they seem to have run into a brick wall this time.

It must be difficult for the US to understand why Taiwanese legislators are so eager to crush US pork imports. Surely they find Taiwanese logic very strange.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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