

Study on the Pathway for Constructing New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperatives in the Context of High-Quality County Economic Development

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Abstract: China has consistently underscored the importance of advancing the comprehensive reform of supply and marketing cooperatives. This reform requires these cooperatives to actively contribute to four crucial areas: optimizing county-level industrial structures and spatial layouts, establishing robust mechanisms for agricultural supply security and price stability, fostering the high-quality development of rural circulation systems, and improving the network for recycling and utilizing rural renewable resources. Based on field research conducted in Shiji Town, Panyu District, Guangzhou, this paper proposes four strategic approaches to revitalize the county-level supply and marketing cooperative system. The goal is to transform these cooperatives into “new-type” entities, enabling them to serve as core drivers of economic development at the county level. In doing so, these cooperatives can effectively promote urban-rural integration and facilitate coordinated development between regions.

Keywords: New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperatives; County Economy; Chain Leader; High-Quality Development; Pathway

1. Current Development Status of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives below the County Level in China

In China today, there is a growing emphasis on supply security and safety. As a non-fully market-oriented system for the distribution of materials and consumer goods, supply and marketing cooperatives possess significant organizational strength and a vast distribution network[1]. The supply and marketing

cooperative system in China holds controlling or substantial stakes in at least 13 publicly listed companies. Notably, the All-China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives (ACFSMC) is the controlling entity for Sino-Agri Union and Sino-Agri Leading, while GD Tianhe is controlled by the Guangdong Provincial Supply and Marketing Cooperative Federation, ZJAMP Group is controlled by the Zhejiang Provincial Supply and Marketing Cooperative Federation, and Hui Long Co., Ltd. is controlled by the Anhui Provincial Supply and Marketing Cooperative Federation. According to the report from the 6th plenary session of the 7th Board of Directors of the ACFSMC, in 2023, its research institutes and affiliated enterprises actively participated in the national "14th Five-Year" key R&D plan. They managed more than 600 national, industry, and group standards and drove agricultural product sales of nearly 10 billion yuan.

The supply and marketing cooperatives have an extensive network that spans across hundreds of counties, thousands of towns, and tens of thousands of villages. According to the official website of the Guangdong Provincial Supply and Marketing Cooperative Federation, the system in Guangdong includes 20 municipal-level cooperatives, 96 county-level cooperatives, and 2,139 grassroots cooperatives. Additionally, 4,574 professional cooperatives and 175 association organizations have been established, with 2,154 corporate entities operating 31,904 business outlets. This includes 13,875 outlets at the grassroots level and 18,029 outlets through chain store systems. The workforce comprises 122,100 employees and 960,600 members, of which 577,400 are farmer members.

Traditionally, the role of supply and marketing cooperatives has included supplying farmers

with production materials and daily consumer goods, purchasing agricultural by-products from farmers, and redistributing them to other regions. Since 2015, several policies from various departments have underscored the importance of continuing the comprehensive reform of these cooperatives, highlighting their pivotal role in Chinese agriculture[2]. In this context, as China promotes the “Hundred-Thousand-Ten Thousand Project” (a national rural development initiative), there is an urgent need to revitalize county-level supply and marketing cooperatives. These cooperatives must be developed into “new-type cooperatives” and serve as key drivers for the high-quality development of the project. This approach will not only promote urban-rural integration but also foster mutual growth between rural revitalization and agricultural modernization, ultimately contributing to the creation of a stronger agricultural nation.

2. “New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperative” Model—the Shiji Township Cooperative in Panyu District, Guangzhou

2.1 Definition of a “New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperative”

In the journey to build a strong agricultural nation, the concept of a “new-type supply and marketing cooperative” has taken on new meanings and roles. While adhering to the principle of public welfare, these cooperatives are now market-oriented, embodying the principles of sustainable urban-rural integration. Their primary function is the effective market-driven allocation of urban and rural resources. At their core, these cooperatives work closely with rural revitalization policies and various rural development platforms, engaging a diverse range of participants to collectively advance the development of production, logistics, storage, and processing infrastructures into a networked and systematic framework. Ultimately, the goal of the new-type cooperative is to provide comprehensive support to the “Three Rural Issues” (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) and serve as a strong state-owned backbone for the national rural revitalization strategy[3].

The Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative in Panyu District, Guangzhou, exemplifies this model of modern grassroots “new-type

cooperatives.” Originally a traditional cooperative that primarily relied on counter sales, with an annual sales volume of only around 20 million yuan, it has transformed into a dynamic enterprise. It now combines modern supermarket operations, chain management, cold-chain logistics distribution, fresh agricultural product delivery, e-commerce, and the recycling of renewable resources. This multi-faceted business model has propelled the cooperative into one of Guangdong Province’s leading state-owned enterprises, with annual sales surpassing 100 million yuan.

2.2 Excellent Practical Experiences of the “New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperative”—Field Research on the Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative in Panyu District, Guangzhou

2.2.1 Ensuring stable supply and prices of agricultural materials, and perfecting the organic connection between “small farmers” and the “big market”

As a model of town-level supply and marketing cooperatives, the Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative in Panyu District, Guangzhou, has developed a comprehensive “production-supply-sales-exhibition” integrated system. This system effectively ensures the stable supply of agricultural production materials and price stability, contributing significantly to the high-quality development of the rural circulation system. Since 2006, the supply and marketing cooperative has actively responded to the “Ten Thousand Villages and Thousand Towns” market initiative in Panyu District, successfully establishing 216 “Baiyue” branded franchise farm stores across the entire district. Subsequently, in 2011 and 2012, it undertook and implemented one of the district’s key livelihood projects, the “Discount Store” construction, launching 10 self-operated discount stores that greatly benefited the public. In 2015, the cooperative made an innovative leap by establishing Panyu’s first agricultural e-commerce platform—“Baiyue Online Shopping”, which supported the “High-Quality Agricultural Products into Communities” initiative, successfully setting up over 40 smart fresh-keeping pick-up stations, greatly facilitating community residents. In 2017, it took on another key responsibility—ensuring campus food safety—by managing and

standardizing several school canteens, ensuring food safety for students.

In 2020, in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cooperative cooperated closely with higher-level authorities during the Spring Festival to distribute epidemic prevention materials for the district's resumption of work and production, showcasing its sense of social responsibility and emergency response capabilities. Over the years, the cooperative has relentlessly worked to strengthen the circulation network of the district's supply and marketing system, continuously expanding the scale and quality of agricultural product management, contributing positively to farmers' income and agricultural efficiency.

Additionally, to broaden the agricultural product sales network, the cooperative's staff frequently visit farms to carefully organize high-quality agricultural products that meet urban demand. They also provide farmers with feedback and suggestions based on consumer preferences for product quality, taste, and packaging design in the Pearl River Delta market, aiming to enhance the value of agricultural products and effectively address sales challenges. The cooperative's collaborative network now extends across Guizhou, Xinjiang, and several areas within Guangdong Province, including Panyu, Zengcheng, Conghua, Huadu, Wuhua, Lianzhou, Shaoguan, and Taishan, with nearly 20 farmer professional cooperatives led by the Panyu District Supply and Marketing Cooperative System, over 20 farmer cooperatives in Panyu's counterpart assistance areas, and more than 10 high-quality agricultural and by-product production bases in Zengcheng, Taishan, Lianzhou, and other regions. Notably, two of its discount stores have been designated as "Vegetable Basket Sales Points" and "Vegetable Basket Production Bases" for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, achieving direct supply and sales connections for over 200 agricultural products, including vegetables, fruits, and livestock. This series of connections has been highly praised by both farmers and consumers.

2.2.2 Solving the "Who Will Farm the Land" issue and ensuring food security

In 2023, under the important policy guidance of safeguarding the red line of basic farmland

protection, Panyu District, Guangzhou, established a dedicated company to recover farmland, followed by land transfer bidding on the "Three Resources" platform. To date, 2,500 mu of farmland have been successfully recovered. The Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative has actively participated, planting 90 mu of late rice, increasing the planting area by 20 mu compared to early rice. The varieties planted include Wuxiang Simiao and Xiangya Xiangzhan. Despite facing heavy rains early in the growing season that flooded the fields, the cooperative strengthened field management and took timely remedial measures, ultimately achieving a bountiful harvest. According to professional yield measurement, the Wuxiang Simiao variety yielded more than 1,000 jin per mu of dry rice, while the Xiangya Xiangzhan variety produced over 800 jin per mu. These high-quality rice varieties were then sold at the cooperative's Baiyue Market and other sales outlets. The early rice variety, Xiangya Xiangzhan, is particularly renowned for its fragrant and soft texture, winning widespread praise from consumers and selling out rapidly. The late rice variety has already attracted many pre-orders.

The cooperative's efforts extend beyond land transfer and rice cultivation and involve collaboration with educational institutions. It has partnered with Qianfeng Primary School in Shiqi Town to organize outdoor practical education activities, allowing children to experience firsthand the planting and harvesting of rice. This not only fosters an appreciation for food but also instills the values of frugality and food conservation in the younger generation. Through its collaboration with Panyu Agricultural Science Institute and other partners, the cooperative has effectively reduced annual rice planting costs by paying once for rice planting technology services while benefiting from technical and labor support.

Looking ahead, the Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative plans to further integrate and develop the entire industry chain for Simiao rice, leveraging its extensive circulation network. It is committed to creating a genuine Panyu Simiao rice brand and has already ventured into the rice noodle processing industry, aiming to offer higher-quality, more distinctive products to the market. These efforts demonstrate the cooperative's

deep commitment to food security and its determination to promote agricultural modernization and increase the added value of agricultural products.

2.2.3 Precision and long-term support for rural areas, achieving urban-rural coordination and regional integrated development

Since 2011, the Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative has been responsible for targeted poverty alleviation efforts for agricultural products in Wuhua County. This marked the beginning of its journey in consumption-oriented poverty alleviation, which later expanded to include regions such as Hezhang in Bijie, Guizhou, and Shufu in Xinjiang. The cooperative continually explores how to leverage its supply and marketing network to support precise poverty alleviation, developing a long-term, efficient support model covering the entire “production-supply-sales” chain. For example, the cooperative adopted a “company + base + farmers” industrial development model in Kuizhang village, based on the local conditions. First, adhering to the philosophy that “teaching a man to fish is better than giving him fish”, the team launched a green, pesticide-free *Ganoderma lucidum* cultivation project in 2017, aimed at creating a long-term industry-driven poverty alleviation initiative. They collaborated with villagers, providing *Ganoderma* seedlings, technical training, and comprehensive guidance throughout the cultivation process. The following year, they established a specialized planting and breeding cooperative, effectively resolving technical challenges and sales issues related to *Ganoderma* cultivation. After two years of practical exploration, the impoverished community witnessed the significant economic benefits brought by growing *Ganoderma*, transforming from initial skepticism to active participation. The number of growers skyrocketed from just a few to over 20 households. In 2019, the average increase in income for *Ganoderma* farmers reached approximately 6,000 yuan. Additionally, the team promoted the cultivation of highland sweet potatoes. Once harvested, the sweet potatoes were directly sold to the Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative. By establishing demonstration bases, they not only showcased efficient cultivation methods but also generated a strong demonstration effect, encouraging over 20 households to join the

sweet potato farming initiative. This gradually established a distinctive “one village, one product” industrial model, characteristic of the region.

Today, customers in many of the cooperative’s outlets can easily purchase regional specialty agricultural products and local souvenirs, such as Wuhua red heart sweet potatoes, Shatian pomelos, Guizhou gastrodia elata, and Xinjiang Hetian red dates and thin-skinned walnuts. These products are directly connected with their origins, ensuring fresh and reasonably priced offerings. The cooperative has also encouraged businesses and institutions to prioritize purchasing products from poverty-stricken areas, successfully fostering a stable consumer base. This initiative has not only ensured direct market access for these products, supplying them to the Pearl River Delta market, but also effectively realized the concept of consumption-driven poverty alleviation, bringing tangible support and assistance to the impoverished regions.

2.2.4 Separation of ownership and management rights, stimulating the vitality of the cooperative

Grassroots cooperatives are the frontline entities directly providing services to farmers and serve as the fundamental pillar for the development of the supply and marketing cooperative system. In the ongoing deepening of the comprehensive reform of supply and marketing cooperatives, the focus has been on strengthening the connection with farmers’ interests. Through various means, cooperatives have worked to restore grassroots organizational structures and foster the development of farmers’ professional cooperatives. Each pilot reform province, based on its unique provincial circumstances, agricultural conditions, and inherent advantages, has forged its own distinct path[4]. Initially, 1,200 town-level cooperatives across the country underwent reforms separating ownership from operational rights, implementing a dual-brand system with distinct management teams. In the early stages of reform in Panyu District, Guangzhou, seven cooperative-owned enterprises were established. However, after several years, only one—Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative—remained operational, with the others having collapsed. In 2000, a three-year transitional period was implemented, followed

by a shareholding system reform at Shiji Cooperative. This reform delineated the proportion of corporate and individual shares, with district-level management and contracts signed every five years, the most recent of which was renewed in 2023. Due to the success of this reform, unlike most grassroots cooperatives that rely primarily on rental income, Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative now generates its revenue mainly from operations, achieving business integration with multiple cooperatives across the province and establishing a preliminary “one network” for provincial supply and marketing services.

3. Constraints on the Development of “New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperatives” at the County Level and Below

3.1 Insufficient Policy Support

There is a general lack of awareness in China regarding the significant role of comprehensive reforms in supply and marketing cooperatives, and some misunderstandings even persist, leading to insufficient policy support. Firstly, certain local governments overlook the public welfare functions of supply and marketing cooperatives, perceiving the preferential policies granted to these cooperatives as excessive and not in line with market competition principles[5]. Secondly, some local governments delegate certain service functions, such as agricultural technology promotion, farmer training, and cooperative development, to the supply and marketing cooperatives, which is often viewed as the cooperatives taking advantage of the reform period to “expand their territories”. Furthermore, provincial and municipal-level supply and marketing federations have been slow in implementing governance reforms that impact their own interests, and they lack effective innovative approaches. The dual operational mechanism of separating government functions from business operations has yet to be fully established[6]. For instance, district-level cooperatives control financial power, requiring all financial transactions of grassroots cooperatives to be reported and approved, which severely hampers the flexibility of grassroots operations.

3.2 Insufficient Operational Vitality and Public Welfare Capacity of Grassroots

Cooperatives

Firstly, the operational vitality of most grassroots cooperatives is inadequate. Despite the significant achievements of the supply and marketing cooperative system, surveys and observations of rural and urban communities reveal that cooperatives are far from the “hot topic” they were portrayed as in 2022. In fact, once the initial excitement fades, they return to obscurity. The fundamental issue lies in the fact that the supply and marketing cooperatives, whether in the formation of the national network or in the allocation of agricultural products and production materials, or in their services to rural and urban communities, have fallen short of expectations. Many grassroots organizations are still unable to effectively perform their roles, failing to form a mutual benefit system with farmers and exhibiting weak service capabilities. Secondly, there is a lack of a strong property linkage between the upper and lower levels of the cooperative organizations. Overall, they still operate as a loose alliance[7]. The higher-level federations primarily require data reporting without engaging in practical work with grassroots organizations. Thirdly, due to a lack of operational vitality, cooperatives often implement one-off public welfare initiatives instead of assisting in the long-term development of local agricultural industries. For example, in targeted assistance programs, the focus is often on one-time consumption support, rather than helping to connect local markets or guide the development of specialized agricultural products[8].

3.3 Low Efficiency in Cross-Departmental Cooperation

Although the grassroots cooperative system has achieved full coverage of townships and administrative villages in a relatively short time, most of these organizations were established under external administrative pressure. In Panyu District, aside from Shiji Cooperative, numerous grassroots cooperatives and the farmer cooperatives under them are not effectively operational, with a serious prevalence of “hollow” or “zombie” cooperatives[9]. Firstly, the traditional administrative structure of supply and marketing cooperatives follows a lengthy, linear hierarchy—spanning from national to provincial, municipal, district, and grassroots

levels. This vertical administrative model, contrasted with the increasingly networked management, modernized business practices, and intensifying competition, creates inherent incompatibilities between the administrative system and operational management. Secondly, the appointment process tends to be horizontal, with individuals often transferred from other governmental departments to serve as leaders of municipal or county-level cooperatives, holding dual roles as both civil servants and cooperative leaders. Meanwhile, grassroots cooperatives do not fall under the civil servant system, which effectively blocks career advancement for capable individuals within these cooperatives. Furthermore, frequent turnover of city and county-level leaders—who often leave before they have fully understood the local cooperative network—leads to a lack of reform and operational motivation[10]. Finally, grassroots cooperatives, being at the frontline, face a lack of guidance and support from higher authorities. There is no clear upward reporting mechanism, and municipal-level cooperatives rarely visit grassroots cooperatives for guidance or research. During surveys, grassroots cooperatives reported that the higher-level direct departments seldom conduct any field visits. Many grassroots cooperatives require coordination or support from their higher authorities for matters such as network operations and public welfare project linkages, but communication is difficult. Additionally, because financial authority rests with the higher-level cooperative, grassroots cooperatives often struggle with limited resources and are unable to make independent investment decisions.

3.4 Aging Talent Pool and Lack of Innovation

Firstly, the operational mindset has not kept pace with market development. In Guangzhou's grassroots cooperatives, there are hundreds of employees, many of whom are part of the public sector workforce, with a relatively high average age and low overall qualifications. Their understanding of modern agricultural technology and agricultural information is insufficient, and their business management capabilities are limited. Many employees are still trapped in a “public ownership” mentality from the 1990s and lack incentives for work or initiative. The business

mindset fails to keep up with the changes in the market economy, and the cooperative system's ability to connect with farmers and foster innovation has gradually weakened[11]. Secondly, the capacity to serve the agricultural sector has declined. Guangzhou's districts have 8 agricultural service platforms and 21 township (village) agricultural service centers, but the number of centers that need to be built is far from sufficient, and the actual number of operational centers is even smaller. The visibility and responsiveness of the supply and marketing cooperatives' service system are even lower than those of market-driven fresh food chain brands. Due to unclear property rights of service centers, ambiguous income distribution mechanisms, and insufficient capacity to serve the agricultural sector, the cooperatives have failed to fully embody their role of being rooted in rural areas, connecting with farmers, and serving the agricultural community[12]. Lastly, the operational status of professional cooperatives is far from optimistic. Taking Guangzhou as an example, the city has established 76 farmers' professional cooperatives at the grassroots level. However, in practice, most of these cooperatives exist merely as legal entities, lacking skilled agricultural managers or technical experts. After their establishment, they struggle to engage in substantial business operations, becoming “empty-shell” cooperatives. The existing management is content with the status quo, with a low level of innovation awareness. They continue operating traditional businesses such as property leasing and the sale of fireworks, without exploring new growth opportunities. As a result, they are unable to lead the market or drive business innovation.

4. Using the Activation of County-Level Supply and Marketing Cooperatives as a Starting Point to Achieve Coordinated Urban-Rural Integrated Development

4.1 Stimulating the Vitality of County-Level Supply and Marketing Cooperatives to Promote Local Economic Development

The first step involves deepening the understanding of leadership cadres regarding the comprehensive reform of supply and marketing cooperatives. Government departments responsible for leadership training

at various levels could integrate discussions on the significance of these reforms into regular training systems, thereby enhancing leaders' understanding of the reforms. Additionally, a comprehensive talent cultivation program for supply and marketing cooperatives might be launched. Strengthening the training of cooperative leaders at all levels on the current situation and tasks of the reform could prove valuable, alongside the establishment of a rotation training mechanism for county and city-level cooperative directors. Newly appointed directors of county and city cooperative boards and supervisory committees would likely benefit from formal training with certification. Drawing from the experience of Shandong Province, the ACFSMC might focus on agricultural social services, grassroots organization construction, "three-in-one" integration, and e-commerce services, selecting several counties with mature experiences to establish specialized training bases, which could accelerate the dissemination of comprehensive reform practices.

4.2 Simultaneously Strengthening Operational Vitality and Public Welfare Capacity

At the grassroots level, supply and marketing cooperatives may play a key role in ensuring the food security of non-grain-producing provinces. If government subsidies for grain production were excessively high, they could inadvertently raise land rental prices, which might not support the broader goal of national food security. Practical experience from Shiji Supply and Marketing Cooperative suggests that for large agricultural operators engaged in grain cultivation, implementing high per-mu yield targets may be necessary. For non-grain-producing regions, leveraging the cooperative's nationwide property assets to increase grain storage capacity and expand county (district) and town-level distribution networks could ensure food security. Furthermore, enhancing public welfare capabilities might strengthen the "new-type supply and marketing cooperative" model, drawing from Shiji's experience in building a "production-supply-sales" framework, which could effectively connect production guidance, logistics, and sales orders, ensuring a seamless cycle and achieving precise, sustainable

support. Regarding operational vitality, activating the operational network of grassroots cooperatives may require reforming the evaluation mechanisms. In addition to profit-based metrics, incorporating indicators such as market share, product sales rates, storage capacity, and distribution capability could help strengthen the cooperative's distribution network.

4.3 Innovating the Development of "New-Type Supply and Marketing Cooperatives"

A return to the original mission of prioritizing farmers' interests, enhancing services for farmers, and strengthening governance mechanisms of grassroots cooperatives might be essential. Following the principle of separating government from business and cooperatives from enterprises, reforms and innovations could be pursued based on local conditions. Adopting a holding company model and market-driven operational strategies might optimize the current administrative structure of county-level cooperatives, and when necessary, a "public-to-business" approach might be introduced to offer career advancement opportunities for cooperative heads. Additionally, integrating and optimizing grassroots cooperatives may require addressing those that have been inactive for long periods, which could involve dissolution or restructuring to enhance their competitiveness. For larger and medium-sized cooperatives, implementing a professional management system could encourage cooperative cadres with entrepreneurial spirit to lead these cooperatives. This approach could potentially strengthen grassroots cooperatives through strong leadership. City and county-level cooperatives could also play an important role in stimulating the development of grassroots cooperatives, utilizing their local advantages to cultivate leading enterprises and strengthen the "farmers helping farmers" model. Developing agricultural headquarters enterprises could enhance their leadership role in key agricultural sectors, such as agricultural materials, cotton, grain and oil, and fresh agricultural products.

4.4 Strengthening the Foundation of Agricultural Talent with "One Understanding and Two Loves"

Introducing market-oriented mechanisms at the

grassroots level could activate the existing talent pool within the system. The supply and marketing cooperatives already possess experienced agricultural professionals whose potential has been limited by the current system. Implementing market-based performance evaluation systems could help unlock their capabilities, thus reviving the cooperatives' function of serving agriculture. Moreover, attracting external talent familiar with the agricultural sector, such as hiring recently retired agricultural system experts as business consultants, might provide valuable guidance. Additionally, recruiting technical and managerial personnel from organizations like industry associations and agricultural research institutions could help to strengthen the talent pool. For redundant personnel, a gradual exit policy might be considered. Lastly, introducing an order-based training model for university graduates within the cooperative system could be beneficial, with curricula designed to align with the "One Understanding and Two Loves" goal. This could provide the cooperatives with a steady flow of young talent for their future reforms, optimization, and expansion.

5. Conclusion

China has consistently prioritized the comprehensive reform of supply and marketing cooperatives as a pivotal strategic task. This reform requires these cooperatives to take an active role in four critical areas: optimizing county-level industrial structures and spatial layouts, establishing robust mechanisms for agricultural supply security and price stability, fostering the high-quality development of rural circulation systems, and improving the network for recycling and utilizing rural renewable resources. Drawing from field research conducted in Shiji Town, Panyu District, Guangzhou, this study proposes four key strategies to revitalize the county-level supply and marketing cooperative system. These strategies aim to drive the transformation of cooperatives into "new-type supply and marketing cooperatives". By strengthening their leadership role within the industrial chain, these cooperatives can become central drivers of county-level economic development. This, in turn, will foster urban-rural integration and promote coordinated regional development, aligning

with broader national goals for sustainable and balanced growth.

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