

China aims to change perceptions of halal

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By Elaine Tan in Kuala Lumpur (China Daily USA)

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Chinese Muslims celebrating the end of the fasting month at a mosque in Zibo, Shandong province, in August last year. The country's Muslim population, estimated at more than 20 million, is a sizable market for halal food. [Photo/Agencies]

Estimated at around 1 to 2 percent of the population, Muslims are very much in the minority in China and concentrated in regions including Ningxia Hui autonomous region, Gansu province, Qinghai province and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. Yet this small percentage still translates into a population of more than 20 million people, representing a sizable market for local and foreign enterprises in halal food and other products.

Southeast Asian companies have been making forays into China while, at the same time, indigenous local businesses that have long provided for the dietary needs of their fellow believers are looking to expand beyond the country's borders.

China's share of total global halal food exports averages about \$100 million per year. This is considered to be a meager figure and has the potential to grow significantly. While there are big local companies that have successfully penetrated the overseas markets, many smaller ones are struggling to be visible.

Both the Chinese government and business sectors appear to be making all the right moves in an effort to win over the Muslim world, according to Muhammad Mohsin Butt, assistant professor of marketing at Nottingham University Business School.

He explains that China is already involved in some good practices to project the country as a serious halal provider, such as organizing international conferences and events, establishing halal manufacturing hubs and industrial zones and forming joint ventures or collaborations with Muslim-majority countries.

For example, the China (Ningxia) International Halal Food and Muslim Commodities Festival and the Investment and Trade Fair have been held since 2005, while Qinghai has hosted the International Halal Food and Products Fair since 2007.

Both are events to showcase China's halal products to the world, promote smaller enterprises and provide sourcing and selling opportunities.

China's courtship with the Muslim world in recent times has also included trade delegations to Islamic nations and two visits to Saudi Arabia by former Chinese president Hu Jintao.

Ningxia, the government's designated hub for halal food production, even boasts its own halal food industrial park. The regional government has a logistics center in Dubai to help local companies establish business relations with international partners.

The main advantage that the Chinese have is their ability to scale, according to Fe Jazzareen, CEO of Persis, a Malaysia-based company that provides services and advice to the halal industry.

"They know how to do volume and they know how to do it at a controlled cost," she says. "There is certainly a lot of potential for the Chinese, not just in food, but also in the services sector in areas such as research, testing and analysis and in emerging sectors such as pharmaceuticals, ingredients and chemicals."

Yet the Asian economic powerhouse is still dogged by negative perceptions.

"The country's image as it stands is not going to help them in terms of credibility in this market,"

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