Zimbabwean blueberries and China

As the world's leading blueberry producer, China imports only the equivalent of about 5% of its output (38,700 tonnes in 2024), almost entirely from Peru and Chile, which already enter duty-free, while African blueberries, absent from Chinese statistics, reach only Hong Kong and Macao. Zimbabwe, whose September 2025 phytosanitary agreement opens the Chinese market to it and which has benefited since 1 May 2026 from the tariff exemption granted to 53 African countries, enters without any customs advantage over its competitors, and its main obstacles would lie less in market access than in its ability to finance the expansion of its production.

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Baby 你就像蓝莓味的汽水
Baby, you're like a blueberry soda[1]

On 22 September 2025, China's General Administration of Customs (GACC) announced the conclusion of an agreement under which Zimbabwean blueberries met China's phytosanitary requirements[2]. A year later, *AfricaNews* reported that Zimbabwe had shipped its first consignment of blueberries to China[3]. Zimbabwe is entering a market in which its two main competitors pay no customs duty on their produce on entry into China. Its advantage would lie not in a tariff exemption but in other strengths.

In 2025, consumption of 'blueberries' in China is reported to have reached one million tonnes[4], equivalent to 0.71 kg per capita, or a quarter of US per capita consumption[5]. 'Blueberries' are a luxury product (**贵族水果**, literally a 'noble's fruit') whose consumption in China is recent. The term most commonly used for these fruits, *lanmei* (**蓝莓**), is a direct translation of the English *blueberry*, that is, the cultivated North American blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), which is different from the common bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). This term is said to have been adopted in mainland China only from 1998[6], but it is said to have been used in Taiwan as early as the 1970s[7], and probably even earlier in Hong Kong. Other names exist, such as *yueju* (**越桔**), which also designates lingonberries (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) and bog bilberries (*Vaccinium uliginosum*), and *dusi* (**篤斯**). The latter are an edible variety that can also be made into wine, traditionally produced in the North-East, but also in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang[8]. However, yet another wording is used in the Chinese customs nomenclature: cranberries (*Vaccinium oxycoccus*), lingonberries (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) and other fruits of the genus *Vaccinium* (**蔓越橘、越橘及其他越橘属植物果实**)[9], which corresponds to the Chinese translation of the title of tariff line 081040 of the UN's Harmonised System[10]. The statistics available to us therefore cover a broader set than that of blueberries alone, without it being possible to infer the exact proportion of blueberries derived from a North American cultivar. In this note, the term 'blueberries' will be used generically, and we shall assume that the trade relates entirely to a single cultivar.

1. PRODUCING COUNTRIES AND THEIR OUTPUT

China is said to have become the leading blueberry-producing country according to studies by Rabobank[11] and the International Blueberry Organization (IBO)[12]. The FAO database[13], on the other hand, ignores China – as well as South Africa – and, for certain countries (Chile, Morocco

1 This is the first line of the song "blueberry" (in lowercase) performed by the Chinese rapper cil.dee in 2023.
2 **海关总署公告 2025 年第 187 号 (关于进口津巴布韦鲜食蓝莓植物检疫要求的公告)**.
3 'Les myrtilles zimbabwéennes à la conquête de la Chine' [Zimbabwean blueberries set out to conquer China], *AfricaNews*, 18 September 2026.
4 **赵新宁**, '**蓝莓产业站上"十字路口"**', **农民日报**, 1 April 2026
5 **舒晓婷**, '**中国蓝莓产业图谱：进口、生产双旺盛，RCEP 利好出口东南亚**', 21 **世纪经济**, 31 May 2024.
6 **吴林**, '**中国蓝莓 35 年 — 科学研究与产业发展**', **吉林农业大学学报** 2016，38(1), pp. 1–11.
7 **黃舜欽**, **氮及磷肥對兔眼藍莓光合作用、生長與開花之影響**, master's thesis, National Taiwan University, 2014.
8 **吴林**, *op. cit.*, p. 1; *Le Grand Ricci Online*.
9 Chinese Customs, **税目税号**.
10 Comtrade.
11 David Magaña *et al.*, *Blueberry update 2025: Unlocking demand to match expanding supply*, Rabobank, 11 November 2025.
12 Cort Brazelton *et al.*, *IBO Global Blueberry Report 2026*, IBO, 27 August 2026.
13 FAOSTAT.

and Zimbabwe), reports figures that differ from those calculated by the other sources. These discrepancies could result from a lack of harmonisation in the calculations. Whereas the FAO database covers 38 countries, the IBO survey is said to cover the whole world. The FAO seems to include wild blueberries whereas the IBO counts them separately. Moreover, when the FAO imputes a value for lack of an official statistic, its estimate remains far below that of the IBO. Table 1 summarises the situation as presented by the IBO for cultivated blueberries, which are those exported by the eleven main producing countries.

Table 1.– Cultivated blueberry production in the top eleven producing countries (IBO)

Country	2023	2024	2025		
	1,000 tonnes	1,000 tonnes	1,000 tonnes	Share of total	Cumulative share
China	535.98	638.58	753.47	32.3%	32.3%
Peru	233.87	329.60	407.80	17.5%	49.8%
United States	282.59	349.13	340.53	14.6%	64.4%
Chile	132.33	163.00	157.92	6.8%	71.1%
Morocco	56.05	71.73	84.94	3.6%	74.8%
Canada	62.80	70.61	83.27	3.6%	78.3%
Spain	70.86	77.96	82.70	3.5%	81.9%
Mexico	72.78	71.38	77.95	3.3%	85.2%
Poland	62.00	66.00	67.70	2.9%	88.1%
South Africa	35.00	38.60	40.00	1.7%	89.8%
Zimbabwe	8.00	7.50	7.50	0.3%	90.2%
World total	1,745.19	2,098.47	2,333.47	100.0%	—

Chinese blueberry production has been the subject of academic, professional and journalistic assessments[14] that converge (production has increased and continues to increase very rapidly) but diverge as to the exact amount. While all agree that Chinese production overtook US production as early as 2020, only the China Chamber of Commerce of Import and Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce and Animal By-Products (**中国食品土畜进出口商会**) claims that it reached almost one million tonnes in 2025 (957,000 tonnes exactly)[15].

2. CHINA'S IMPORTS AND SUPPLIERS

The data compiled by Comtrade for 'blueberries' (HS code 081040) show that Chinese imports were multiplied by 16 in volume and by 21 in value between 2013 and 2024 (see Table 2). According to the IBO, whose figures for 2024 are identical to those of Comtrade, they reached 51,650 tonnes in 2025, a third more[16]. These imports nevertheless remain modest when set against production: about 5% in 2024. In other words, these imports would play more of a seasonal supplementary role than that of a main source of supply. China has even become an exporter (2,593 tonnes in 2024), mainly to Hong Kong and Macao (26.2%), and to South-East Asia (Singapore: 22.3% and Malaysia: 15.1%). In this respect, with 7,100 tonnes, it would rank in 2025 among the world's top fifteen exporters, ahead of Zimbabwe[17].

[14] In addition to the sources already cited, we also consulted **全球果蔬网**, '**中国蓝莓产量达到 95.7 万吨**' (22 December 2025); ECNS, 'Sweet prospects for nation's blueberry industry' (7 March 2025); **徐 艺 格** *et al.*, '**蓝莓产业现状及技术发展趋势分析与展望**' (August 2024) and **齐鲁晚报**, "**价格'腰斩', '蓝莓自由'背后是产业'理性回归'**" (17 April 2026).

[15] **大旺国际**, '**中国蓝莓产量达到 95.7 万吨**', 23 December 2025.

[16] Cort Brazelton *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143 and 151.

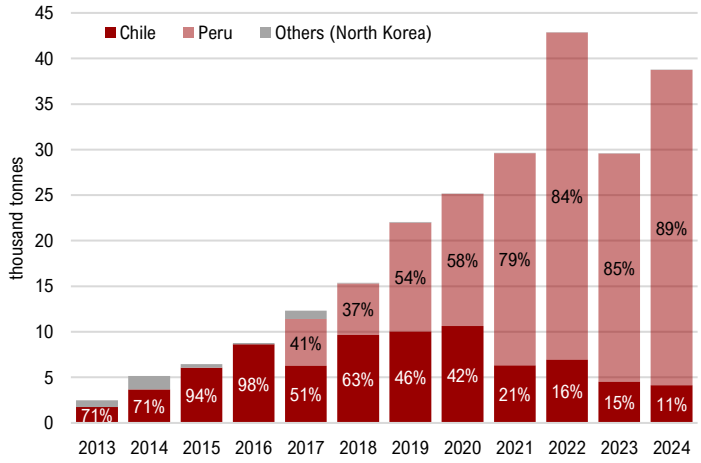
[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

Table 2.– Chinese imports

Year	Volume (1,000 tonnes)	Value (US$ million)	Price (US$ per kg)
2013	2.5	16.9	6.8
2014	5.2	40.8	7.9
2015	6.5	68.6	10.6
2016	8.8	78.5	8.9
2017	12.3	104.4	8.5
2018	15.4	122.0	7.9
2019	22.0	175.4	8.0
2020	25.2	184.3	7.3
2021	29.6	213.1	7.2
2022	42.8	306.7	7.2
2023	29.6	260.3	8.8
2024	38.7	354.7	9.2

Chile was for a time China's main supplier (see Figure 1). From 2017, Peru began to compete with it before exercising a quasi-monopoly[18] from 2021. Other suppliers have always played a very minor role, even if, in 2013 and 2014, North Korea may have contributed as much as 29% of imports[19]. On the tariff front, Peru and Chile enjoy a zero duty under their free-trade agreements with China, whereas the most-favoured-nation (MFN) duty stands at 30%. China's two main suppliers thus already enter duty-free, while Zimbabwe is seeking to promote its products.

Figure 1.– Chinese imports by origin



The years in which imports of origin other than Chilean or Peruvian were recorded are years in which North Korea was a significant supplier.

Figure 1, drawn up from Chinese declarations, does not show that Hong Kong imported 32,538 tonnes of blueberries in 2024, of which 25,611 tonnes came from Peru, and then re-exported 27,040 tonnes to mainland China. This state of affairs suggests that the Chinese statistics recorded these imports according to their origin and that products arriving via Hong Kong are now treated statistically at national level in the same way as those arriving via Shanghai, Qingdao, etc.

[18] 78% of imports from Peru are concentrated between September and December, while 95% of those from Chile take place between January and March.

[19] North Korea supplied 'blueberries' at less than one dollar per kilo (US$0.44/kg in 2013, against US$9.45/kg for Chile). Such a price gap suggests a different product, perhaps wild berries of the genus *Vaccinium*, such as the lingonberry (越橘) and the bog bilberry (篤斯), which grow in the forested provinces of northern China and in North Korea.

Consequently, African blueberries that have transited through Hong Kong should also appear under their African origin in the Chinese data and be added to those imported directly.

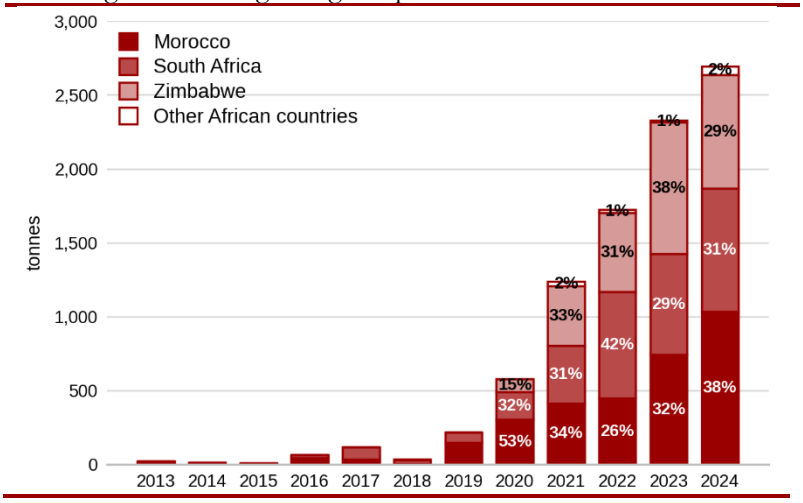
3. China's African suppliers

It is remarkable that Chinese import declarations for blueberries record no African supplier between 2013 and 2024, with the exception of Zambia, with 1,350 kilos in 2020. Zambia, for its part, declares having exported 2,449 kilos in the same year. Morocco reports exports of highly variable amounts between 2021 and 2024, while Namibia reports a single shipment in 2022. No explanation of this situation is entirely convincing.

While African blueberries are absent from the Chinese statistics, they are nevertheless present in Hong Kong and Macao, two administrative territories with their own sanitary regulations. In Hong Kong, the import of fresh fruit and vegetables for consumption is exempt from the requirement to produce an import licence and a health certificate[20]. In Macao, it is simply required that imported fruit and vegetables be accompanied by a health certificate issued by the competent authorities of the country of origin[21]. The far stricter sanitary requirements applied in mainland China might explain the situation, and the discussions that Morocco and South Africa are conducting could be a prelude to more formally recorded shipments.

Figure 2 gives an overview of Hong Kong's imports of African blueberries between 2013 and 2024. Three countries (Morocco, South Africa and Zimbabwe) alone supply 98% of the fruit arriving in the former colony 1n 2024. It is unlikely that these blueberries are re-exported to mainland China, given our earlier remark on sanitary controls. It is more likely that they are consumed locally, or even re-exported to Singapore, Macao or Malaysia.

Figure 2.– Hong Kong's imports from African countries



4. What future for Zimbabwean blueberries in China?

Zimbabwean blueberries already had a foot in the Chinese market through Hong Kong, even if the volume of its deliveries was quantitatively small. Zimbabwe's production of cultivated blueberries would represent less than 1% of Chinese production, and Zimbabwe's contribution to Chinese

[20] Inspection and Quarantine, Plant (Importation and Pest Control) Ordinance, Chapter 207.
[21] 港澳门海关, 受卫生检疫或植物检疫约束之货物.

consumption is for the time being potentially marginal, all the more so as Zimbabwe's exports are mainly destined for South Africa and Europe.

Zimbabwe is not classified by the UN among the least developed countries (LDCs), and its blueberry exports were therefore taxed at the most-favoured-nation rate (30%), unlike Chile and Peru, which signed free-trade agreements with China in 2005 and 2009 respectively. The tariff exemption in force since 1 May 2026 for 53 African countries, whether or not they are classified as LDCs, is certainly a positive factor in this respect. However, a more decisive factor is probably the phytosanitary agreement signed in 2025, which authorises the entry of Zimbabwean blueberries into China. Finally, the most significant barriers probably lie on the supply side itself, in particular in the ability of Zimbabwean producers to finance the expansion of their production capacity[22].

[22] 'Les myrtilles zimbabwéennes à la conquête de la Chine' [Zimbabwean blueberries set out to conquer China], *AfricaNews*, 18 September 2026.