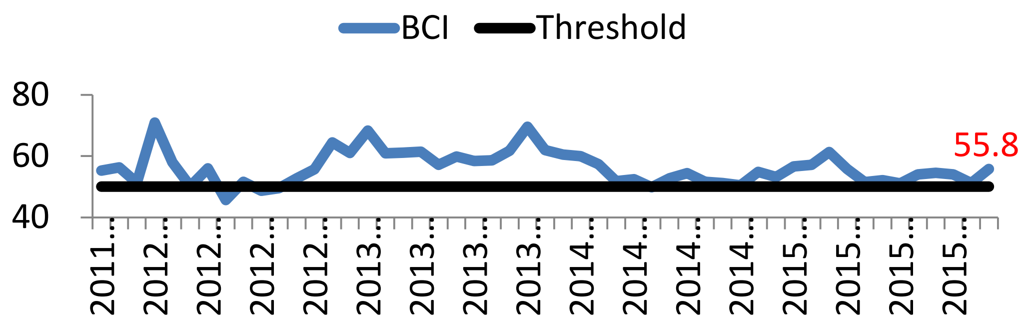
CKGSB BCI

February 2016

4 March 2016 CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

The CKGSB Business Conditions Index (BCI) registered 55.8 in February, to a certain extent improving on January's overall index of 51.2 (Figure 1). This shows that for CKGSB's sample firms, of which the majority are relatively successful in China, the next six months are seen with a degree of optimism, yet how sustainable this optimism is remains to be seen.

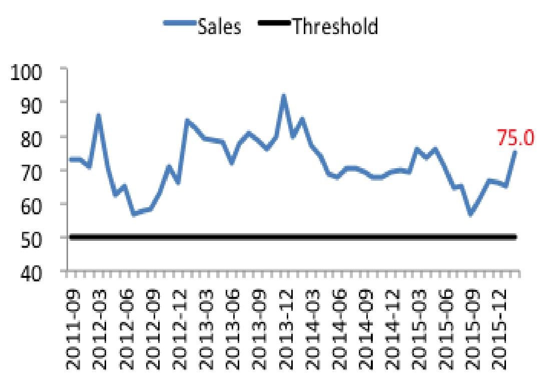
Figure 1



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

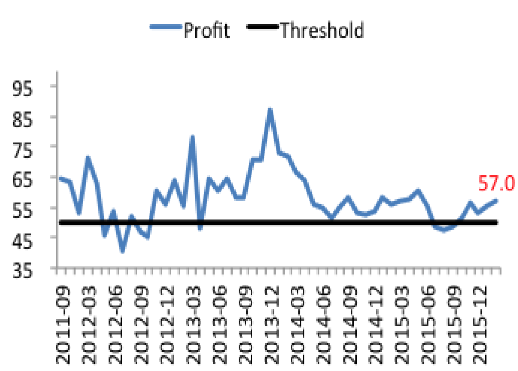
The CKGSB BCI comprises four sub-indices for corporate sales, corporate profits, corporate financing environment and inventory levels. Of these four sub-indices, three are forward-looking indicators, and one, corporate financing, measures current business sentiment. These four sub-indices for February will be discussed below:

Figure 2



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

Figure 3

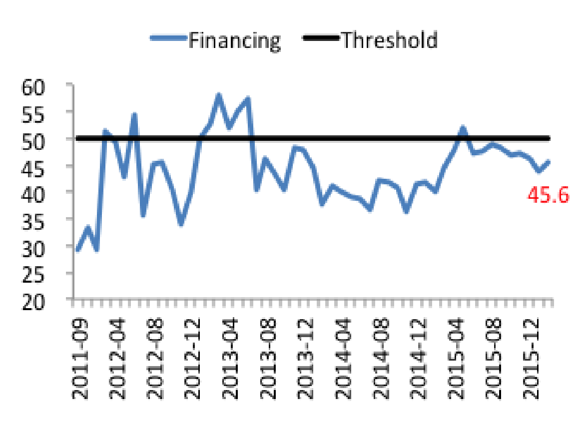


Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

All four sub-indices rose in February. We will look at the data in detail below. Starting with corporate sales, the sub-index rose considerably in February from 65.3 to 75.0.

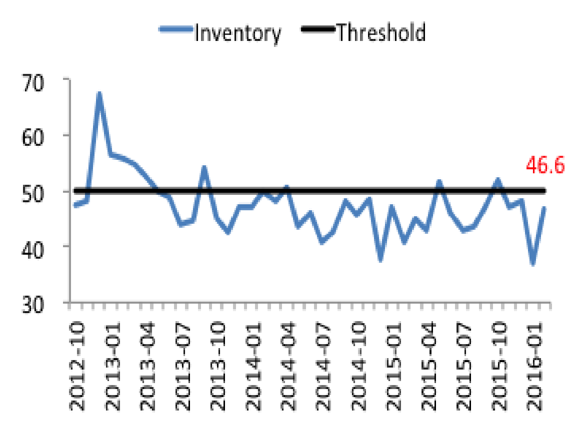
The profit index rose, from 55.6 in January to 57.0 in February. From Figure 3, we know that in the four years since this survey began, profit expectations have rarely registered lower than 50. However, in recent months, a sharp decline has been observed, beginning with 60.3 in May and going below 50 in July, August and September. In October, profits expectations returned to over 50, and this year to over 55, showing that the profit outlook over the next six months is becoming more positive.

Figure 4



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

Figure 5



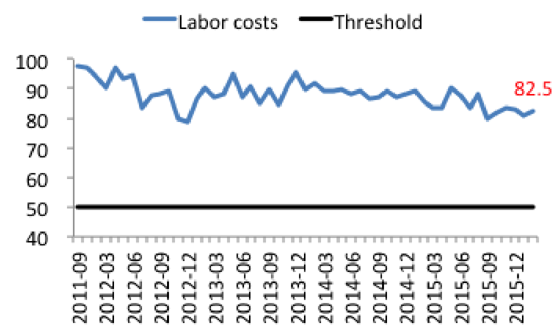
Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

The financing index rose slightly in February from 43.7 to 45.6, remaining below the confidence threshold of 50. From Figure 4, we can see that the financing index has been below 50 over the long term, even falling below 30 in some months. This shows that the financing situation for Chinese companies is far from ideal. Companies face both financing difficulties and high costs. The BCI – and this reading in particular – predominantly reflect the situation for Chinese SMEs.

The inventory index rose significantly from 37.0 in January to 46.6 in February. In May 2015, the index briefly rose to 51.7, crossing the confidence threshold, but it has since fallen again, and in October dropped under 50, remaining in the doldrums in November and December. Hovering around the confidence threshold, inventory levels clearly show signs of instability. How this will play out, we have to wait and see. But one thing is certain: from the data we have collected over the long term, the inventory situation is far from positive.

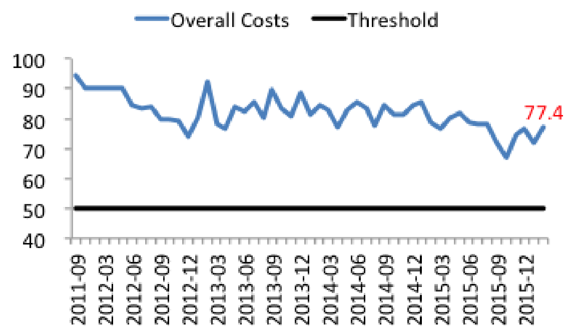
Apart from the main BCI, we have compiled statistics on costs, prices, investment and recruitment forecasts. Let us consider these sub-indices in turn, beginning with costs:

Figure 6



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

Figure 7

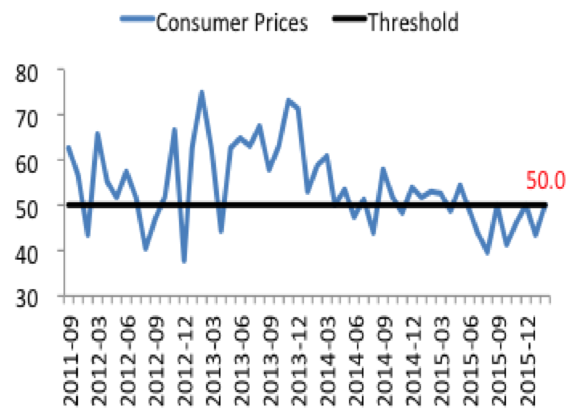


Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

This month, the labor costs index rose from 80.8 back up to 82.5, while overall costs rose from 72.1 to 77.4. The fact that labor costs have remained at a high level over the long term indicates that high cost levels in China are a structural issue rather than cyclical. While the upward trend in overall costs is slowing, rapidly rising labor costs indicate that other factors of production other than labor costs are expected to slow. We believe there may be two reasons, first, a drop in commodity prices, and second, excess capacity leading to sluggish prices for manufactured goods.

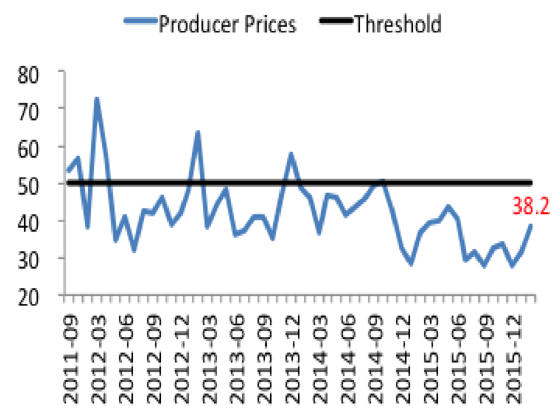
On the prices side, the consumer prices index bounced back this month from 43.6 to 50.0. Producer prices also sprung back from 31.5 in January to 38.2, although these figures are all still on the negative side of the confidence threshold.

Figure 8



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

Figure 9



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

From our data, the "high costs, low prices" combination means that companies cannot increase prices to consumers or downstream producers to steer their way out of cost pressures, meaning that despite acceptable sales, the profit index is performing poorly: despite two months of rebound in the profit index, the index is at a low level compared with 2013 and the first half of 2014. This echoes an earlier point about one of the biggest structural problems facing the Chinese economy – manufacturing overcapacity. This does not indicate that Chinese people are now so well off that they do not need as many goods or services. On the contrary, for a middle income country, China's domestic demand is healthy, but there are countless sectors in dire need of investment, including healthcare, education and pensions. Overcapacity is a result of misallocation of resources, placing resources in low return sectors such as the steel industry. Overcapacity means we need to carry out economic structural reforms, allowing the market to guide an outflow of resources that has become stagnated, and configure a way to put valuable resources to better use. In the short term, such reform may trigger a greater slowdown with rising unemployment likely to damage vested interests, and this causes the resistance to such a plan. However, for the long-term health of the Chinese economy, this is an unavoidable step.

The CPC Central Committee has a clear perspective on this, and has promoted its views publicly. In the Central Economic Work Conference held at the end of last year, the Central Committee made clear the importance of tough structural reforms in economic and social development in 2016. Five key areas were highlighted, namely: production overcapacity, inventory levels, leverage, efforts to reduce costs and making up for systemic shortcomings. Mentioned first in this list of government tasks, it seems that the central authorities are well aware of the issue of production overcapacity.

Overcapacity and the growth of debt are linked. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. Inefficient industries are unable to gain sufficient profit or cash flow from operations alone, so in order to function, survive and even expand, burgeoning debt is accumulated. As debt increases, so economic pressure will build up and when the debt burden spills over into crisis, economic and social unrest may result. We need to monitor debt, but as of today, there is little cause for optimism in this regard.

According to the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), from 1996 to 2014, China's total debt-to-GDP ratio rose sharply from 113% to 235.7%. The highest proportion was in non-finance sectors, and in 2014, the total non-finance corporate debt-to-GDP ratio was 123.1%.

Following the discussion of costs and prices, investment and recruitment will be considered. The corporate investment index rose from 63.1 to 67.9, with the labor demand index rising from 65.0 to 71.1. These two indices are interesting, as since September 2011, while other indices have fluctuated significantly including profit and inventory and the overall BCI, these two and the costs index have remained consistent.

Figure 10

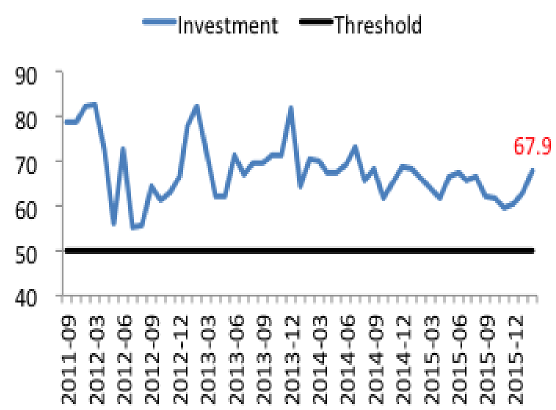
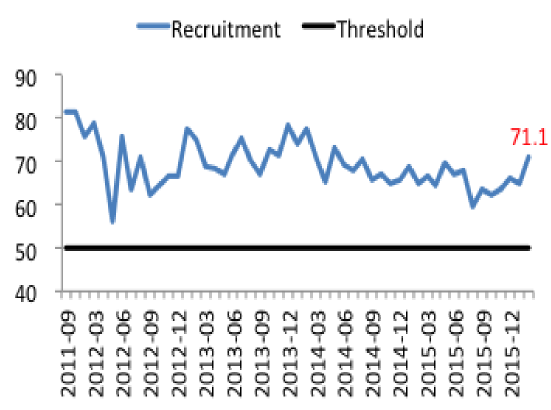


Figure 11



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

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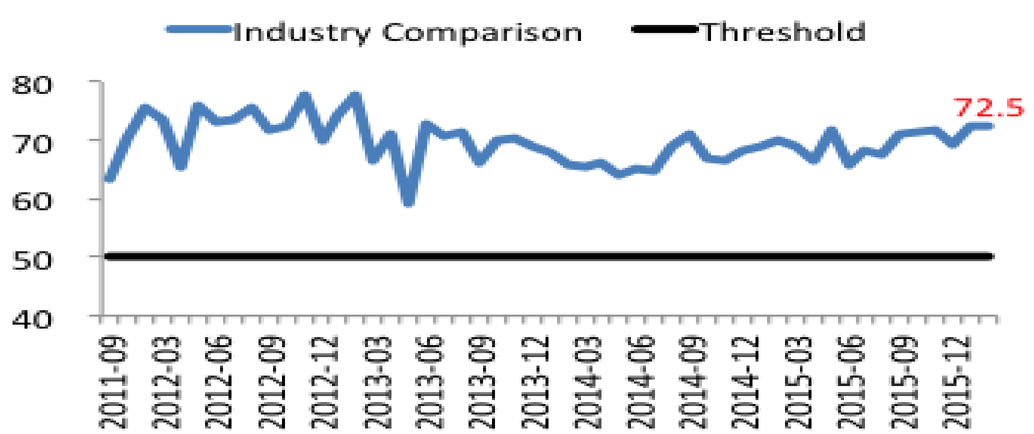
The investment index and labor index have both been above 50 over the long term, and comparatively high at that. Taking investment as an example, since September 2011, the index has been between 50 and 60 four times, and the rest of the time above 60, and above 80 on four occasions. The labor demand index has only been between 50 and 60 twice, and above 60 for the rest of the time, twice registering above 80.

While sales are still good, cost pressures are mounting, a long term poor financing condition exists and prices and profit performance are weak. But what is most interesting is that firms are still in expansionary mode, ploughing more money into investment and recruitment. With such poor short-term business expectations, why are businesses making such counter-cyclical decisions?

Perhaps, for good quality companies, a time of adversity is indeed the right opportunity to expand. But there is another possibility, that for companies “expansion is the only way” sums up how industries such as real estate, and the related sectors of steel, glass, and cement, feel under the government’s favorable policies. Whenever there is an economic downturn, the government applies the logic it first used in 2009 and then again more recently, leading companies to expect an expansionary period following a contraction. From this perspective, reverse-cycle business operations make sense. But what about for the economy as a whole?

Finally, the BCI is generated wholly on the basis of statistics gathered from leading enterprises whose executives have studied or are studying at Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business (CKGSB). In the questionnaire, we ask respondents to indicate whether their firm is more, the same, or less, competitive that the industry average (50), and from this we derive a sample competitiveness index. Consequently, as our sample firms are in a relatively strong competitive position in their respective industries (Figure 12, a reading of 72.5 in February), the CKGSB BCI indices are higher than government and industry PMI indices and the conditions for most companies are even more difficult.

Figure 12



Source: CKGSB Case Center and Center for Economic Research

CKGSB BCI Introduction

In June 2011, the CKGSB Case Center and the Center for Economic Research initiated a project to gauge the business sentiment of executives about the macro-economic environment in China – called an index of business conditions.

Under the direction of Professor Li Wei, in July 2011, the two research centers designed and tested the BCI survey. In September 2011, the first surveys were distributed and results computed. From May 2012 to January 2016, the research team has published 45 monthly BCI survey reports.

Explanation of the Index

The CKGSB Business Conditions Index (CKBCI) is a set of forward-looking, diffusion indices. The index takes 50 as its threshold, so an index value above 50 means that the variable that the index measures is expected to increase, while an index value below 50 means that the variable is expected to fall. The CKGSB BCI thus uses the same methodology as the PMI index.

The survey asks senior executives of companies whether their main products are for consumers or non-consumers, and then asks how they think product prices will change in the next six months. Based on survey responses, we have been able to report expectant changes in consumer and producer prices.

We ask companies for information pertaining to their relative competitive positions in their respective industries. Based on survey responses, we compute a competitiveness index for our sample. The higher the competitiveness index, the more competitive our sample firms are in their respective industries.

Method of Calculation

During each survey, respondents are asked to indicate whether certain aspects of their business (e.g., sales) are expected to increase, remain unchanged, or decrease over the forthcoming six months as compared to the same time period last year. The diffusion index is calculated by summing the percentage of "increase" responses and half of the “remain unchanged” responses.

Of all the indices measured for the CKGSB BCI, the overall business conditions index is an aggregate index, which has been calculated, since December 2012, by averaging its four constituent indices of sales, profit, financing environment and inventory. The aggregate BCI index before December 2012 uses a different composition of constituent indices, and is therefore not directly comparable to the current BCI index.

About Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business

Education for a New Era of Global Business
Established in Beijing in November, 2002 with generous support from the Li Ka Shing Foundation, CKGSB is a private, non-profit, independent educational institution and the only business school in China with faculty governance. The school offers innovative MBA, Finance MBA, Executive MBA and Executive Education programs. In addition to its main campus in the center of Beijing, it has campuses in Shanghai and Shenzhen and offices in Hong Kong, London and New York.

Thought Leaders on Business in China

CKGSB faculty, through their on-the-ground research and close relationships with leading domestic executives, provide global thought leadership on both the theory and the practical reality of real-life business in China. They consistently generate important insights into areas that are poorly understood outside of China, such as the globalization strategies of Chinese companies and competition and collaboration among state-owned enterprises, private businesses and multinationals.

World-Class Faculty with a Global Perspective

CKGSB is the only business school in China with the reputation and resources to attract faculty from top business schools such as Wharton, Stanford, NYU, and INSEAD. The majority of CKGSB faculty members were born and raised in China before leaving to study and teach abroad. Their bicultural backgrounds have endowed them with a valuable capacity to interpret global business in the context of both China and the West.

The Research Team

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