

# *Reflections and Perspectives on China's Food Safety Issues in the Context of Risk Society*

Du Chaofeng<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Ocean University of China, Qing Dao, China*

*a. 15589052852@163.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Despite the increasingly sophisticated management systems in China, food safety issues continue to be a persistent problem. This paper examines the underlying issues behind food safety regulation in China, focusing on the recent surge in incidents. Against the backdrop of a risk society, food safety issues have become a hot topic in Chinese society today. Our research on it should not only be limited to interpreting it as a shallow phenomenon of unscrupulous businessmen profiting at the expense of conscience, nor should it be simply attributed to the negative effects of modern food chemical technology development. Instead, we should start from the perspective of the theory of risk society to gain a more thorough understanding and comprehensive reflection. The backdrop of a risk society in transition, China's food safety problem has become increasingly severe. To better withstand risks and move towards a safer society, it is essential to fully recognize the importance of food safety and establish a scientific and reasonable system of risk governance through improving legal mechanisms, risk communication and interest mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Risk Society, Food Safety, Risk Governance Enter

## 1. Introduction

China is currently undergoing a high-speed transformation from a state-controlled society to a market-oriented governance society, which has brought about concentrated social problems and conflicts. The increasingly severe state of food safety has exposed the flaws in both the system and conscience of the country, which is the result of years of over-exploitation of society, environment, and trust in China's social development.

The theory of risk society was proposed by Ulrich Beck and is a detailed examination and systematic study of modern society and the future world. He believes that with the development of society and the changing times, human beings have entered the development stage of late industrial society from industrial society [1]. The development model of late industrial society will bring about large-scale disasters, including external disasters such as hurricanes and floods caused by climate change, as well as environmental degradation, nuclear pollution, abuse of genetic engineering, chemical pollution, and risks of artificial intelligence [2]. Against the backdrop of a risk society, food safety issues have become a hot topic in Chinese society today. Our research on it should not only be limited to interpreting it as a shallow phenomenon of unscrupulous businessmen profiting at the expense of conscience, nor should it be simply attributed to the negative effects of modern food

chemical technology development. Instead, we should start from the perspective of the theory of risk society to gain a more thorough understanding and comprehensive reflection.

## **2. China's Food Safety Situation**

In the midst of China's societal transition, the country faces a series of social conflicts and challenges in governance. One of these challenges is food safety. Since the melamine-tainted milk scandal involving the company Sanlu more than a decade ago, the severity of the incident remains unforgettable. The saying "food is the paramount necessity of the people" has become common knowledge. However, in recent years, food safety issues have continued to emerge, expose the flaws in traditional food safety regulation and highlight the contradictions between traditional food safety regulation and modern food regulation systems.

Further analysis reveals that the major food safety incidents in China in recent years have new characteristics compared to previous traditional food safety issues. These incidents are characterized by pollution at the source, closer ties to the market, higher levels of technological involvement, and increased uncertainty. It is evident that the technical methods and organizational systems previously employed to address food safety are no longer sufficient to tackle the complex food safety risks brought about by technological advancements and mass production. These incidents reflect not only a lack of respect for food safety among businesses but also the negligence or complacency of relevant regulatory authorities, allowing businesses to act recklessly. The traditional food safety regulatory body is the government, and the effectiveness of regulatory measures largely depends on the government's capacity for social regulation. However, reactive regulation in China suffers from a lack of diverse regulatory tools, inadequate fulfillment of responsibilities, and challenges in implementing regulatory policies due to institutional shortcomings.

## **3. The "explosion" of food safety issues in China under the dual pressure of transitional society and risk society**

### **3.1. China's food safety problems "blowout" under the dual pressure of transition society and risk society**

China is in a transitional period between traditional and modern societies. Firstly, there is a rupture and stratification problem in social hierarchy, with social classes solidified and fragmentation among different classes and groups, lacking effective bonding mechanisms and unable to form linked groups. Secondly, there is a rupture between regions and social levels, mainly manifested in the rupture between urban and rural areas due to uneven regional development. Finally, structural rupture problems also exist in the management of culture and social life. From the perspective of management and control, there is also a structural rupture between the political power system and the public, reflected in the estrangement of their relationship to some extent. When political power is disconnected from local realities and practices and becomes increasingly distant from the public, it exacerbates the conflict between the political power system and the public.

In addition, with the development of modern technology, it provides convenient conditions for enterprises to conduct covert operations without spending a lot of energy and money on improving product quality. A large number of cheap raw materials for chemical and industrial mass production are readily available. Moreover, at the institutional level, there are institutional deficiencies in relevant regulatory agencies, even after major food safety issues are exposed to the public, relevant regulatory systems are modified and improved only later. Under the dual pressure of risk society and transition period, China's food safety issues have shown an explosive trend.

### **3.2. Government credit crisis, expert authority collapse, and interest game between government and enterprises**

According to Beck, there is an organized irresponsibility problem in risk society, where people can seek help from one regulatory agency after another and demand that they take responsibility [3]. T Currently, China's food safety management department's main problem is not that its departments are inadequately set up but that they are overly set up. The complex food safety management system makes it difficult for seemingly complete food safety regulatory departments to implement food safety regulation effectively. After food safety incidents occur, they pass responsibility on to each other, with multiple law enforcement agencies causing mutual blame-shifting, overdrawn government credit in front of the public, leading to a government credit crisis.

Expert authority has also faced unprecedented challenges in food safety storms. Before food safety incidents occurred, experts dominated people's daily lives and claimed to be planners for happy lives due to their scientific knowledge. Consumers were in a weak position in the knowledge-rights unequal social structure. But after food safety incidents occurred, experts' roles transformed from planners for happy lives to risk creators. People constantly reflect on their relationship between knowledge and rights, gradually losing their faith in science. The complex relationship between "fairness and efficiency" also makes it challenging for governments to develop and implement policies comprehensively and objectively.

### **3.3. Reflection**

In the current transitional period, Chinese society is experiencing the phenomenon of coexistence of risks, which has led to the "explosion" of food safety issues in China under these dual pressures. The government and "expert scholars" have become accomplices in spreading and maintaining the development-oriented ideology of inferior food. At the same time, it is necessary to timely reflect on modernization, reshape social order, focus on social mobilization and the construction of risk prevention systems, and ultimately comprehensively improve the level of the entire governance system.

## **4. Social Governance: Responses to Food Safety Issues**

### **4.1. The Subject and Functions of Social Governance for Food Safety Risk**

The theoretical foundation of social governance lies in cooperative governance theory and collaborative governance theory. Cooperative governance theory has gained increasing attention in contemporary society, as it recognizes the risks of failure in both state and market governance [4]. Therefore, in the structure of social governance, a singular governing entity should be avoided, and a multi-governance model should be adopted. All stakeholders should cooperate in addressing core issues.

The positive interaction and coordinated development among the subjects of food safety risk governance are an objective requirement for ensuring food order. In the governance structure, various entities including government departments, citizens, and social organizations should exercise autonomy within their respective domains while actively collaborating towards the common goal of ensuring food safety. The various stakeholders, represented by risk controllers, consumers, producers, and expert groups, mutually constrain and cooperate with each other to promote social harmony and sustainable development, achieving the process of "co-governance" and "good governance."

## **4.2. Key Measures for the Operation of Social Governance for Food Safety Risk**

### **4.2.1. Legal Mechanisms**

Formal legal systems are a response to the uncertainty of risk society and a necessary requirement for building a rule-of-law state. The complexity and high frequency of food safety risks require clear and strict laws for regulation. All food safety standards must be strictly implemented, and a system for establishing food safety bottom lines should be developed. As mentioned earlier, in the governance field of food safety, various stakeholders such as risk assessors, risk managers, consumers, producers, and expert groups cooperate together to participate in food safety regulation, each fulfilling their responsibilities and roles while jointly exercising their rights to curb the worsening trend of food safety risks.

### **4.2.2. Risk Communication Mechanisms**

Risk communication mechanisms involve the interactive exchange of potential risk information and viewpoints during the risk generation process. The transparency of food producer behavior is an objective requirement in a risk society. Communication mechanisms guarantee this requirement. In the governance process, all participating entities continuously exchange information through robust communication mechanisms. This necessitates strong communication mechanisms to ensure that producer behavior is exposed to sunlight, guaranteeing process transparency and information symmetry to prevent the emergence of a "lemon market." Similarly, the Food Safety Administration should strengthen the public disclosure of supervision information on food safety, regulatory policies, specific measures taken, and administrative outcomes through press conferences and effective communication with various sectors of society. Since the power of market supervision departments alone is insufficient to lead the entire regulatory process, traditional bureaucratic administrative "black boxes" will no longer exist [5]. Therefore, market supervision departments must publicly disclose governance policies, measures, and outcomes to the public, enterprises, individual business owners, and other entities to fulfill their market supervision responsibilities.

### **4.2.3. Interest Mechanisms**

The ultimate goal of supervising and managing food safety is to effectively control food safety risks and achieve orderly market development. Markets have a natural profit orientation that often prioritizes interests and efficiency over ethics and fairness. One of the important goals of social governance for food safety risk is to achieve a dynamic balance of interests among all parties involved. It is essential for the state to play a role in adjusting risk distribution, particularly in allocating attention to supporting vulnerable groups in risk avoidance. It requires regulating social financial distribution in response to diverse needs by considering diverse interests, preferences, individual behaviors, as well as equal mechanisms for rights and responsibilities. Considering social fairness and justice while seeking new interest balances is crucial when controlling enterprises by requiring them to produce high-quality food that meets national standards. Financial support should be provided to such enterprises rather than focusing solely on their illegal or improper interests related to food safety. This will encourage enterprises to prioritize ethical values during production processes, implement self-regulation, and promote the improvement of national risk control capabilities.

## **5. Conclusion**

In an era of rapid globalization and increasing modernization, risk control faces more complex circumstances. However, the transitional period in Chinese society itself has some flaws, which not

only amplify the threat of risks to social security but also weaken the effectiveness of risk control during this period of transition. It can even be said that the flaws in the transitional society itself are important sources of risk. According to the theory of risk society, modern society's risks have characteristics such as suddenness, uncertainty, and structural discontinuity. The continuous expansion of the public sphere and the increasing complexity of public affairs in China during the transitional period have led to a shift from management to governance in the social structure. This shift is based on practical considerations and the need to maintain political stability.

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