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Literature Review on Current Status and Countermeasures of Food Safety in China

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Abstract: Food safety has become one of the widespread concerns around the world. Food is now generally considered an ordinary commercial commodity, with companies producing and manufacturing food more for economic benefits. Therefore, many illegal activities were carried out by food producers and manufacturers for profits. This has led to frequent food safety problems in China. This literature review aims to analyze the current situation and countermeasures of food safety in China through the review of the literature related to China's food safety in recent two decades. The results show that in recent years, China's food safety problems have occurred frequently, which has exposed the defects of China's food safety system. The scope, extent and measures of government intervention are considered to be important factors in determining the state of food safety.

Keywords: Food Safety; Current Status; Countermeasures

1. Laws and regulations on food safety issued

In China, food safety has always been an important issue related to the livelihood of society and a social issue related to public safety. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to effectively regulate food safety (Zhang, Lin, and Liu, 2016). In 1982, China had a Food Hygiene Law (Tan and Yang, 2005). This law specifies the Chinese Ministry of Health as the administrative body in charge of food safety, and its basic responsibilities include setting the standards of China's food safety (Zhang et al., 2018). The Sanlu milk powder 'melamine' scandal exposed serious deficiencies in China's food safety regulation; the Chinese government immediately introduced a series of laws and regulations to ensure that food safety was safeguarded. The most representative is the Food Safety Law enacted in 2009, which combines important international standards and a policy system specific to China (Lam et al., 2013). This law made food safety standards mandatory and was updated in 2015. The promulgation and implementation of the 2009 Food Safety Law marked a significant change in the composition, structure, and evolution of China's food safety system, chasing down standardization and aligning with international standards (Zhang et al., 2018).

In addition to enacting and revising the Food Safety Law, the Chinese government has also worked on other fronts to ensure food safety (Wu and Zhu, 2019). In March 2013, the China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA) was officially established, an agency that integrates various food safety regulatory authorities, including the State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA), the Inspection and Quarantine Bureau (IQD), the State Food Safety Office (SFSO) and the Industrial and Commercial Bureau (ICD) (Lu and Wu, 2014).

2. The current state of food safety in China

However, in recent years, from the "melamine" incident in 2008, "gutter oil" in 2010 to McDonald's and many other

restaurants that used expired ingredients in 2021, food safety problems still occur frequently in China (Wu and Chen, 2018). These scandals have exposed flaws in China's food safety system (Lu and Wu, 2014). Ji and Ko (2021) state that the government should supervise food safety. In reality, there is still room for improvement in the practical implementation of regulation by government departments. Shimokawa et al., (2021), Jen and Chen (2017) believe that the reason why food safety problems still occur frequently after the introduction of relevant policies and laws is that these measures have been promoted too quickly to be implemented.

3. The role of the government in food safety

Experts held different views on, for example, the effectiveness of the government's role in ensuring food safety. Some experts believe that the introduction of relevant government policies and laws will help ensure food safety in China. For example, a study by Lu and Wu (2014) argues that the enactment of food safety laws and effective enforcement of food safety regulations are important to ensure food safety in China. Starbird (2000) states that the extent to which the government enacts laws and policies (GR) will positively influence the input of firms in controlling food quality and safety provision. The large amount of GR has prompted the food industry to develop standardized industry rules to enhance effective management of food quality and safety, and food producers must adopt advanced and reliable food production and processing technologies.

Others hold the view that there is a limited role that government can play in participating in ensuring food safety. For example, Liu (2010) argues that an effective food safety regulatory system can reduce the frequency of food safety scandals to a certain extent, but it does not adequately guarantee the high quality and safety of food production.

However, some studies do not believe that government intervention can effectively improve food safety. Zhang et al. (2021) studied the impact of government intervention on food safety performance. The results show that government intervention is not necessarily effective and even negatively correlated with food safety performance. There are three main reasons for this. From the perspective of the government, because of the “regulatory trap”, it is hard for the government to achieve the expected regulatory objectives if certain constraints are not met. Chinese economist Zhang (2009) said that the government’s supervision should be controlled as much as possible. Otherwise, it is easy to fall into the “regulatory trap”. For example, supervision will cause a huge amount of anti-corruption costs (Zhang, 2009). The more supervision, the more serious the corruption problem may be (Zhang, 2009). From the perspective of market dynamics, excessive government intervention will reduce the motivation of market participants and lose interest in improving food safety (Zhang et al., 2021). From a consumer perspective, excessive government intervention will lead to high consumer expectations of food safety (Zhang et al., 2021). Government intervention does not only promote the formation of food safety norms, but the main aim is to promote the improvement of food safety standards. However, numerous factors need to be considered in the implementation of government interventions, which act as a barrier. Due to these barriers, in many cases, government interventions do not achieve the desired goals (Zhang et al., 2021).

4. Countermeasures and suggestions for food safety

The scope, extent and measures of government intervention are considered to be important factors in determining the state of food safety (Zhang et al., 2021). The government should be committed to responsible supervision and scientific decision-making. This requires that food laws and regulations ensuring evidence-based food regulatory decisions and other key needs, including transparency and active stakeholder participation (Zhang et al., 2018).

Government intervention is an essential part of ensuring food safety (Yan, 2012). However, government intervention alone cannot fully guarantee food safety. The improvement of food safety requires the combined efforts of all parties (Jia and Jukes, 2013). In addition to government intervention and regulation, increased public awareness of food safety and increased transparency in media coverage can also contribute to food safety (Lam et al., 2013), and Ji and Ko (2021) argue that public and media involvement is important to ensure food safety in China. The whole society must work together to monitor food safety and all stakeholders should be educated about food safety (WHO and FAO, 2003). Lu and Wu (2014) suggest that the Chinese government should encourage the media and the public to monitor food safety by establishing a paid reporting

system for violations of the law. A list of companies with problems in food safety management should be published regularly to encourage media coverage and follow-up (Unnevehr and Hoffmann, 2015). In addition, the Chinese government should publicize laws and policies related to food safety to guide rational public consumption and raise public awareness of health and environmental protection (Bai, Ma, Gong, and Yang, 2007). In terms of ensuring food safety and rebuilding public trust, even if the government is responsible for legislation and enforcement, the Chinese food industry needs to recognize that they are ultimately responsible and accountable for food safety (Lam et al., 2013).

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