

A perspective and reflection on Chinese food from the public management perspective

Chaofeng Du

Ocean University of China

15589052852@163.com

Abstract. In an era of rapid globalization and an increasingly modernized risk society, risk control faces more complex challenges. The transitional period in Chinese society itself has certain flaws that amplify the threat of risks to social security while weakening the effectiveness of risk control during the transitional phase. It can even be argued that the flaws inherent in transitional societies are significant sources of risk themselves. Risks in modern society exhibit characteristics such as suddenness, uncertainty, and structural fractures. With the continuous expansion of the public domain and increasing complexity of public affairs in China during the transitional period, the societal structure is gradually shifting from management to governance, driven by practical considerations for maintaining political stability. From the perspective of public management, facing the severe issue of food safety under the dual pressures of the impact of risk society and the instability of the transitional period, it is insufficient to rely solely on traditional risk control concepts and methods. Instead, there is a need to promote the democratization of professional knowledge through the improvement of legal mechanisms, communication mechanisms, and interest mechanisms. This ensures the democratization of professional knowledge, fosters the development of "citizen science," and guarantees the public's right to participate, including the rights to be informed about risks, freedom of choice, and the right to knowledge participation. Thus, it rebuilds public trust in the social system, genuinely safeguarding the "safety on the tip of the tongue."

Keywords: Multilevel Governance, Food Safety, Public Management

1. Current situation of food safety in China

China is currently undergoing a rapid transformation from a society under overall state control to a market-governed society, entering a high-speed transitional period fraught with risks where social issues

and conflicts are concentrated. The increasingly severe state of food safety exposes deficiencies in both the system and conscience to the public. This situation is also a consequence of the overconsumption of social, environmental, and trust resources over many years of development in Chinese society.

During this transitional period in Chinese social governance, numerous challenges arise from social contradictions and conflicts. One of these challenges is the issue of food safety. The proverb "People regard food as their prime necessity, and safety as the foremost concern" has long been common knowledge. However, in recent years, food safety issues have been incessant. Genetically modified soybeans have been added to sandwich cookies without clear labeling on the packaging. Bright Dairy returned deteriorated milk for processing. Tea leaves containing highly residual pesticides, such as dichlorvos, which has toxic side effects on the liver, kidneys, blood, and other systems, have been reported. Peacock green, a carcinogenic substance, was found in eels and freshwater fish at fish markets. Shockingly, reports indicate terrifying methods used in eel farming, involving the use of over ten different drugs, including aureomycin and chloramphenicol, and the use of potassium permanganate to catch eels. Some unscrupulous fish farms even use leather waste as feed for fish, chickens, and pigs, which requires the addition of large amounts of chemicals. The excess scraps are ground into powder and mixed with corn flour and salt before being sold as feed. The issues exposed by these food safety incidents sound the alarm for food safety regulatory authorities, indicating flaws in the traditional approach to food safety regulation by the government, and a conflict between regulating traditional food safety with modern regulatory systems.

Further analysis reveals that major food safety incidents in China in recent years exhibit new characteristics compared to traditional food safety problems of the past. They are characterized by source pollution, closer connections to the market, high levels of technological intervention, and increased uncertainty [1]. It is evident that addressing food safety issues requires a higher level of government regulatory capacity, transitioning not only from "management" of food safety issues but more importantly toward "governance." The shift is from a singular regulatory model with the government as the core entity to a multilateral governance model where the government, social organizations, enterprises, and the public collaborate cohesively.

2. Public management perspective on food safety issues in China

2.1. The "surge" of food safety issues in China

In the transitional period of Chinese society, positioned between traditional and modern societal forms, the perspective of a risk society reveals structural ruptures [2]. From a management and control standpoint, there exists a structural disconnect between the political power system and the public, manifesting as a certain level of estrangement in their relationship. As political power becomes detached from local realities and practices, the relationship with the masses becomes increasingly distant, intensifying contradictions between the political power system and the public. In this social environment, consensus among various social strata and groups becomes challenging, emotional connections between individuals diminish, and a widespread "indifference syndrome" prevails. The dilemma of broad societal mobilization stimulates various groups to pursue self-interest maximization without regard for societal morals, ethical values, and sustainable development.

On the other hand, the issue of uncontrolled food safety during the era of the risk society in China is related to two objective processes. First is the social uncontrol associated with structural institutional transition and cultural misalignment. In the process of transitioning from an overall society to a diverse society, diverse societal entities have not formed effective cooperative forces, leading to a tendency of fragmentation and detachment. Difficulty in achieving coordinated action and frequent conflicts and disorders arise among these entities. Cultural misalignment occurs due to the uneven pace of change in various components of societal culture during the transition process, resulting in a lag in the adjustment of relevant controls. In the field of food safety, cultural misalignment is evident in the conceptual realm, mainly in the lack of social responsibility and ethical awareness among food enterprises. Some segments of the public exhibit apathy toward food safety issues, with only a minority genuinely concerned about them. Moreover, the technologies and methods employed in food testing are not easily accessible to the general public. Even those concerned about food safety and health hesitate due to the high cost of food testing. From the perspective of enterprises, profit-driven behavior leads them to prioritize financial gains, often disregarding moral and ethical values. To exacerbate matters, regulatory authorities often exhibit low levels of law enforcement, and offending enterprises face minimal consequences after violations. Furthermore, regional protectionism resulting from collusion between government and business prevails, where local enterprises producing substandard products receive lenient treatment to protect local fiscal revenue. Therefore, in modern society, accompanied by the risks arising from technological advancements and misuse, disparities and misalignments between various segments are inevitable, giving rise to various societal problems. In other words, a certain degree of uncontrol is an inherent phenomenon in China's transitional society under the dual pressures of the risk society and the transitional period, leading to a surge in food safety issues [3].

2.2. Interests game among different entities

Furthermore, food safety issues present a paradox between fairness and efficiency, reflecting an outcome of interests game. From the perspective of public management, the government, as the representative of public interests, should prioritize the pursuit of public welfare and seek benefits for the society. On the other hand, enterprises, aiming for the maximization of their own interests, operate within the market domain where the pursuit of economic benefits and efficiency takes precedence. Once unrestrained, this pursuit can lead to disorder and chaos. Hence, there exists a certain contradiction between the government and enterprises in the well-known public management dilemma of "fairness and efficiency." Theoretically, the government should emphasize public values and strive to promote social fairness and justice. However, in reality, governments often prioritize economic growth, making it challenging to balance economic growth with social fairness. The complex relationship between "fairness and efficiency" also makes it difficult for the government to formulate and implement policies comprehensively and objectively.

2.3. Summary

Considering the current situation of transitional China, the conventional risk management strategies are not applicable to the current risk control needs in the transitional period. The risks faced by Chinese society at present exhibit a phased characteristic, rendering the traditional single-entity management model inadequate to meet the demands. From the perspective of public management, the shift from

management to governance represents a general direction for enhancing governance capabilities and levels in modernizing China during this transitional period. The field of food safety management is no exception; it should move away from past management models towards a modernized governance approach characterized by multi-level governance. Simultaneously, it is crucial to reflect on modernization, reshape social order, focus on the construction of societal mobilization and risk prevention systems, and ultimately elevate the overall level of the governance system.

3. Practical mechanisms for multilateral governance of food safety

3.1. Collaborative governance among diverse entities

The theoretical foundation of social governance stems from collaborative governance and synergistic governance theories. Collaborative governance theory has garnered increasing attention in contemporary discussions, contending that both state and market governance carry inherent risks of failure. Therefore, within the structure of social governance, a shift away from single-entity governance to a multilateral governance model is advocated. Various entities collaborate in addressing core issues of governance.

The cooperative interaction and coordinated development among diverse entities in the shared governance of food safety risks are objective requirements for ensuring food order. In the governance structure, various stakeholders, including government departments, citizens, and social organizations, both act autonomously within their respective domains and actively engage in cooperation to collectively strive toward the common goal of ensuring food safety. Forces represented by risk controllers, consumers, producers, and expert groups, among others, not only mutually constrain each other but also collaborate to drive the harmonious and symbiotic development of society. This process achieves "co-governance" and attains "good governance"[4]. Among these entities, the China Food Safety Administration plays a prominent role as a key participant and is the responsible authority for managing food safety risks. Governments at all levels should clearly define the operational mechanism of social governance, formulate relevant laws, regulations, and food safety standards, and conduct timely assessments of the implementation by relevant departments. Consensus meetings should be organized to enhance the democratic and scientific nature of decision-making. Producers, under the supervision of risk controllers, consumers, peers, expert groups, third-party organizations, and the media, engage in honest operations, exercising strict control over the entire production process. Additionally, to enhance the success rate of regulation, severe penalties should be imposed on enterprises violating food safety standards, and those with knowledge who fail to report should also be penalized. This creates incentives for stakeholders along the same industry chain to actively engage in internal supervision, addressing food safety issues at the source. Public consumers should actively participate in reporting and supervision to safeguard their own rights. In reality, the public is not unwilling to supervise but lacks relevant oversight mechanisms. Widespread awareness campaigns regarding food safety, including various laws, regulations, reporting hotlines, and incentive measures, should be implemented. Social organizations should conduct product quality testing and certification, assess the credit and risks of enterprises, and promptly disclose relevant information.

3.2. Legal mechanisms

All participants in market activities must adhere to unified policies, directives, and norms, whether they are the regulated entities, those related to regulation, or the regulators themselves. The principles of collaborative governance and government leadership ensure the enforcement of this approach. Strict implementation of various food safety standards is essential, and the establishment of a food safety red line system necessitates clear behavioural norms for all entities in the market. This ensures procedural justice in food safety regulatory laws, requiring risk management authorities to supervise producers in accordance with legal rules.

3.3. Risk communication mechanism

The Food Safety Administration should enhance the transparency of information related to food safety supervision, regulatory policies, specific measures taken, and administrative outcomes. It should conduct open communication through press conferences and engage with various sectors of society effectively. Given that the Market Supervision Administration's influence alone will be insufficient to lead the entire regulatory process, the traditional bureaucratic administrative "black box" will no longer exist. Governance cannot be conducted in secret.

The direct result is that the Market Supervision Administration will openly disclose governance policies, measures, and outcomes to the public, enterprises, individual business owners, and various other entities to fulfil its responsibilities in market supervision. Throughout the entire process of food safety management, the collaborative governance entities engage in mutual communication, consultation, constraint, and promotion. They work with both division of labour and cooperation, involving the exchange of information, sharing of resources, clear rules, and effective limitations. This collaboration and constraint ensure the transition from a formal to a substantive public participation, creating a path for the effective construction of trust based on the democratization of professional knowledge, and ensuring consistent execution.

3.4. Interest mechanism

The ultimate goal of supervising and managing food safety is to truly control food safety risks and achieve orderly market development. While markets naturally lean towards profit, a sole focus on interests and efficiency may overlook morality and fairness. One of the crucial objectives of the social governance of food safety risks is to achieve a dynamic balance of interests among all parties. The state's vital function is to play a role in adjusting the distribution of risks, especially in allocating attention to supporting vulnerable groups in risk avoidance. It involves regulating societal financial distribution amid diverse demands, addressing various interests, preferences, and individual behaviours, and implementing mechanisms for equal rights and responsibilities. Considering social fairness and justice, seeking new interest balances, and controlling enterprises by requiring the production of high-quality, nationally standardized food should be accompanied by financial support. Conversely, for enterprises neglecting food safety, the state should enforce mandatory collection of their illegal and unfair gains. This ensures that enterprises prioritize the values of corporate ethics in the production process, practice self-regulation, and promote the enhancement of the country's risk control capabilities and levels.

4. Conclusion

In addressing the issue of controlling food safety risks, it is imperative not to rely solely on the strength of national political power and to recognize the limitations of state authority. In a more modernized society, especially within the context of a Chinese society undergoing transformation and facing the impact of modernization risks, national power must undertake effective guiding measures. These measures should encourage the active participation of diverse entities in risk governance, stimulate their engagement, transform passivity into proactiveness, and enhance the capacity to resist various sudden risks in modern society. Additionally, it is essential to guide the organized participation of society and the public in the food regulation process, fostering a cooperative governance relationship. Only through diverse collaboration and the formation of synergies can food safety risks be better resisted. This collaborative effort, throughout the entire process of risk prevention, dispersion, and control, establishes a stable governance order, ultimately elevating governance capabilities and levels.

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