Journal of Cleaner Production xxx (2015) 1–11

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Cleaner Production

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jclepro

Consumer trust in different food provisioning schemes: evidence from Beijing, China

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 November 2014
Received in revised form
17 September 2015
Accepted 18 September 2015
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Consumers
Food safety
Trust
Alternative food-provisioning
Beijing

ABSTRACT

Consuming safe and sustainable food requires trust. Consumer trust in food can be established in different ways, including through personal relationships or various institutional arrangements established by government, private companies and/or civil-society organisations. The recent increase in food-safety incidents and sustainability concerns in China suggests a dwindling trust in the current government-dominated food governance arrangement. This paper investigates whether emerging alternative trust arrangements and modes of food supply are better able to build consumer trust in contemporary China. Based on a survey of urban middle-class consumers in Beijing using various (i.e., alternative and conventional) food-supply modes, the role and importance of personal and institutional trust arrangements are compared. We found that even among the wealthier and more educated consumers in Beijing, only a small proportion regularly use alternative food-supply schemes; most rely on conventional wet markets and supermarkets. Buying food is primarily constrained by convenience, freshness and the price of food and less by food-safety concerns. In Beijing, trust in food-safety information remains largely derived from the government and less from the market (private certification schemes) or civil society. These findings contribute to the increasing body of knowledge on the embedded character of food consumption and on the relevance of designing policy strategies that connect institutional context and particular consumption practices. In our conclusion, we argue that to secure safe and sustainable food provision, the present government-based trust regime in China requires strengthening through linking up with market- and civil society-based trust regimes, complemented by elements of personalised trust.

1. Introduction

In 2013, European consumers discovered that their beef might consist of horsemeat, and American consumers wondered whether they could still trust their organic spinach after an *Escherichia coli* outbreak. Following the 2008 melamine crisis, Chinese consumers remained concerned when buying milk, particularly for babies and small children. These are only a few examples of a seemingly endless series of food scandals that have occurred around the world (Bánáti, 2011). Although most experts claim that food safety has been improved over the years through superior technologies, better monitoring devices, stricter control measures and more elaborate legal frameworks, these food-safety arrangements seem to have repeatedly failed to generate the necessary trust among consumers. Increasing distrust in formal schemes to guarantee safe food has resulted in a recent blossoming of alternative food networks (AFNs) in large cities to improve food quality, reduce the environmental impact of food production and enhance consumer trust (Jarosz, 2008).

The current literature on trust and food seems to be preoccupied with a juxtaposition between personalised trust, which is characterised by alternative, local, small-scale food networks, and institutionalised trust as a component of conventional industrial food-supply systems. Consumer trust in food from short supply chains and small-scale production is considered to be 'personalised'. That is, trust is established and maintained through knowledge regarding the origin of food and the way in which it is produced (Pollan, 2008). In contrast, large-scale supply schemes rely on

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.09.078
0959-6526/

'institutionalised' trust based on strict, science-based, government regulations applied by private firms and controlled by public authorities (Seuring, 2013; Vergragt et al., 2014). This article aims to question this juxtaposition by analysing consumer trust in food safety in urban China, where food provision has evolved into large-scale industrialised systems and also where alternative food networks have recently been introduced.

This paper starts with a brief description of consumer trust in China and the recent emergence of AFNs. Subsequently, the concept of trust is discussed in detail and in connection with food risks to identify different trust-in-food arrangements. These arrangements are applied in a case study on food consumers in Zhongguancun Sub-District in Beijing. China's capital aims to become a world city by 2050 and considers environment and health as the primary challenges to achieving this goal. We conclude by discussing different strategies for building trust in food among urban Chinese consumers.

2. Food safety in China

The contemporary food supply in China is complex because of the country's large size, its millions of smallholders connected to (often distant) markets through unevenly developed physical, commercial and institutional infrastructure and the rapid growth of urban centres, which have increased the physical and social distance between food producers and consumers (Scott et al., 2014; Zhu, 2011; Garnett and Wilkes, 2014). For decades, the predominant goal of China's food policy has been to secure affordable food for a large, increasing population of low-paid workers, occasionally to the detriment of the environment and human health (Cheng, 2012).[1] Economic progress has resulted in a shift away from a grain-based to a substantially more meat- and poultry-based diet (Lam et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2011), which has made food more susceptible to safety risks.

The recurrent food-safety incidents and scandals that have resulted from this complex food system with its focus on food security have undermined Chinese consumer trust in the safety of their food (China Consumer Association, 2006; Grunert et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2011). In 2012, food safety moved to the top of the list of issues regarding which the Chinese were most concerned (FORHEAD, 2014). The country's 2009 Food Safety Law is the primary food regulation aimed to control national food quality and safety (Jia and Jukes, 2013). The law consists of formal food-safety standards, monitoring and control mechanisms and various requirements for certified safe, green and organic food (Pagnattaro, 2010).[2] However, this regulation seems to have failed to generate trust in food among consumers (Cheng, 2012; Veeck et al., 2010; Zhejiang Consumer Association, 2009). This regulation has been criticised for its lack of effectiveness (Lam et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2013). Until 2013, at least 13 governmental agencies were involved in food-safety management and supervision, with many institutional frictions and overlapping responsibilities (Bai et al., 2007). The 2013 institutional reform was a major step towards achieving better coordination between the relevant agencies and overcoming their institutional faults. However, additional time is required to assess the reform's effects. Another major step was the revision of the 2009 Food Safety Law, which would make it one of the world's most stringent such laws. This revision was approved by the State Council on May 14, 2014, and after three separate rounds of comment, implementation is expected for 2015.

Trust in private food-safety regulation in China is also low (Liu et al., 2012). Generally, few food products are privately certified (Tao et al., 2011), and where private labels are present, consumers distrust them because they are perceived to be counterfeit or received in return for financial inducement rather than a guarantee of food quality/safety (Sun and Collins, 2013; Wang et al., 2009). Private food-production and processing firms are mostly small and inconspicuous. Thus, they lack vulnerability when faced with loss of reputation from food scandals. Legal procedures are ineffective, and firms easily change brands and names following a scandal. With respect to food safety, Chinese consumers distrust industrial-scale food producers, which are believed to place their own profit ahead of consumer safety and environmental concerns (Chen, 2013) and therefore not considered to guarantee food safety. As Mol (2014) argues, with the absence of transparency regarding food quality and safety in supply chains, private food-safety regulation does not function, which forces China to rely predominantly on inadequate state regulation.

This context of shortcomings in the public and private regulation of food safety in the mainstream food supply has inspired recent experiments with AFNs (Shi et al., 2011). AFNs are 'emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardised industrial mode of food supply' (Renting et al., 2003, p. 394). AFNs constitute a broad category of initiatives to provide consumers access to safe, more sustainably produced food. Over the last five years, the market for such 'alternative' food has rapidly expanded (ITC, 2011; Zhou et al., 2013), and new schemes to supply vegetables and other food from the producer directly to the consumer have emerged. For instance, box schemes, farmers' markets, home grown food (Si et al., 2015; Qi et al., 2008). Consumers in these markets are generally wealthy urban families with young children, families with members who have health problems, overseas returnees and foreigners (also from Taipei and Hong Kong), as well as young and white-collar workers (Scott et al., 2014). There is no official inventory, overview or systematic literature on these AFNs for China. Only anecdotal information could be collected on the diversity, scale, organisation, financial models, consumer involvement and geographical spread of these AFNs in China. Generally, AFNs create more direct – often face-to-face – relationships between producers and consumers, introduce new forms of transparency in agricultural production practices (e.g., farm visits, webcams), private forms of (food and food production) inspection and control (via intermediary organisations, private standards, supervising committees, third-party control), secure higher prices for farmers and reduce environmental impacts. Most AFNs are local and small-scale and serve a relatively small group of consumers, although a number of initiatives have enlarged their coverage and enhanced their professionalism and scale as their businesses have grown.

This paper focuses on the role that AFNs play in building trust in food among consumers in China. We analyse the extent to which consumers participate in AFNs and the factors that affect their trust in different AFNs.

3. Conceptualising trust in food

In recent decades, trust has become a prominent theme in sociological debate because of the increased awareness of the presence of risks (as anticipations of undesirable future events; Beck, 1992) and the need to address uncertainty (because the future is contingent). Trust combines knowing, not-knowing and the unknowable (Gross, 2007) and involves by definition, as Möllering

[1] E.g., the first Chinese agro-industry with large national companies, the dairy industry (Wang et al., 2008), was also the sector affected by one of the most severe food-safety crises: the melamine crisis.

[2] In 2009, organic agriculture in China was practiced on 2 million hectares, involved 4000 enterprises and represented a domestic market of over 1.9 US$ billion (ITC, 2011).

Please cite this article in press as: Zhang, L., et al., Consumer trust in different food provisioning schemes: evidence from Beijing, China, Journal of Cleaner Production (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.09.078