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REVIEW

The third-party regulation on food safety in China: A review

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Abstract

Stakeholders in the field of food safety management in China can be classified into three categories, government, food producers (farmers and enterprises), and the third-party regulatory bodies. The third-party regulation has experienced rapid development in past twenty years, and recently received considerable attention from consumers and the central government. This paper provides a review about the development, problems and future trend of the third-party regulation on food safety in China. To be specific, five forms of the third-party regulation are assessed, including media exposure, the third-party certification, regulation by consumer associations, social movements promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and regulation by industry associations. The study concludes that media and consumer associations are the major players in the third-party regulation and are highly repudiated among customers. The food certification industry has developed rapidly, but is now facing crises of confidence among consumers because of its lack of self-regulation. NGOs and industry associations still remain in the early development stages of food safety management, and therefore, are of little importance in current regulatory bodies.

Keywords: food safety, China, the third-party regulation, media, certification

1. Introduction

Stakeholders in food safety management can be classified into government, food producers (farmers and enterprises), and the third-party regulatory bodies. Based on the taxonomy of social sciences, society can be defined as three interconnected fields (Zheng 2006). Government is the first sector that belongs to the public. Marketing or profit organizations constitute the second sector and belong

to the private field. The third sector, which is independent of the former ones, comprises social organizations. This taxonomy can also be applied to food regulation. As stated in *Food Safety Law of China* in 2015, the producer is responsible for food safety and should: (1) comply with relevant legal provisions and standards, (2) be subject to public supervision, and (3) assume social responsibilities. The responsibilities of local governments are also clarified, particularly, to lead, organize, and coordinate food safety supervision and management under their jurisdictions. Judging from above statement, food producers are primarily responsible for producing safe food, and local governments are primarily responsible for monitoring food markets. Apart from food producers and the government, other regulatory bodies on food safety are called the third-party regulatory bodies. The third-party regulation, as a new concept proposed in recent five years, has received much attention from Chinese scholars and consumers (Ye 2013; Zhang

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et al. 2014; Deng 2015). Compared with co-regulation, the third-party regulation does not contain governmental regulation and the self-regulation of food producers. In the third-party regulatory, media organizations, third-party certification groups, consumer associations, social movements promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry associations, etc. are introduced to food safety management. In the interactive system, various private and public groups construct a supervision network that ensures food safety (Fig. 1).

To supplement governmental regulation, the third-party regulation has been playing an increasingly important role in ensuring food safety in recent years. As the middle-income classes in China increase rapidly, people become more concerned about food quality rather than food quantity. Three major problems in food safety regulation exist. First, customers find it difficult to detect unsafe food because of its credence attribute (Starbird 2007). For example, pesticide residues and heavy metals could only be detected using specialized equipment. Second, small-scale food factories are scattered in different areas and are therefore difficult to be regulated. Third, local governments tend to conceal the food safety problems. In China, the local governments are responsible for regulating food safety issues and are penalized by higher administration when a food scandal is exposed. Additionally, local government officials have political incentives to promote local economy (Li and Zhou 2005). Therefore, local governments tend to protect the interests of large food companies whose taxes are main sources of government revenue. As a result, the third-party regulation has developed rapidly in the past decades.

Compared with that in developed countries, the third-party regulation in China has several special characteristics.

For example, food certification is widely acknowledged around the world because it provides consumers with their desired product attributes, such as organic or sustainable practice (Gómez *et al.* 2011). On the contrary, certification in China is currently facing crises of confidence. Under the principle of “small government and big society”, industry associations in the U.S. are highly disciplined: they actively monitor member firms and expel illegal enterprises out of their groups (Lenox *et al.* 2003). By contrast, industry associations in China rarely reveal such scandals. In Europe, social movements such as promotions, protests, and boycotts are often launched by NGOs and the media (Davis *et al.* 2005; King *et al.* 2007). The boycott of hormones used in beef production and the appeal for animal welfare are among the most famous Europe cases. Similarly, Chinese NGOs have produced several preliminary results in food safety management. For example, NGOs boost social movements nationwide such as Community-supported Agriculture (CSA) farms and disseminate food safety knowledge to customers (Shi *et al.* 2011). However, the management of NGOs still requires further development because of its late start and immaturity.

China is currently undergoing important food policy reforms, especially for food safety and quality. The importance of the third-party regulation is highlighted more strongly in the revised *Food Safety Law of China* in 2015 than in the earlier law in 2009. For example, it is the first time that the management principle of co-regulation is proposed in this *Food Safety Law of China*. Also, food education begins to enter the national education system, and the third-party regulatory bodies, such as media and NGOs, are encouraged to educate consumers. It is also highlighted that media should reveal food scandals in an objective and reasonable

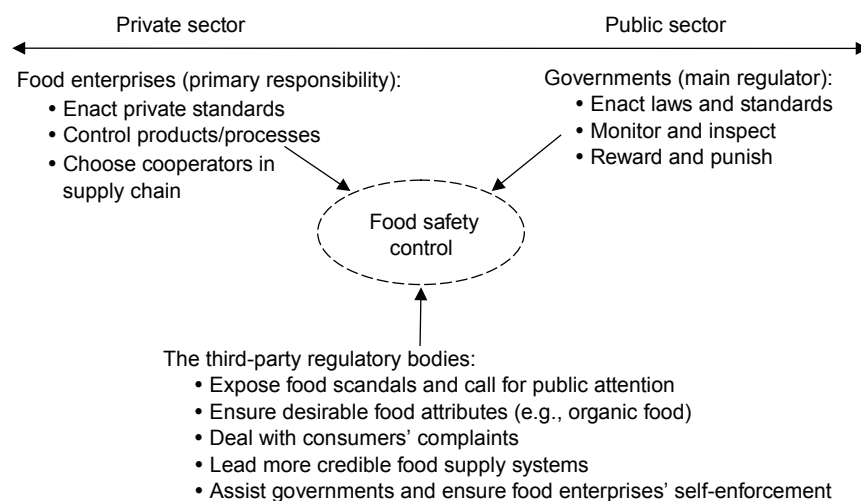


Fig. 1 Three main entities of food safety management in China.

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