



Review

Food safety assurance systems in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is the top food safety city in China. It is a large consumer-oriented city, with more than 95% of the food imported from abroad. The overall food safety rate has been 99.7% for the past 6 years. This paper discusses food safety assurance system in Hong Kong, specifically the food safety status of Hong Kong, its food safety regulation agencies and food safety assurance systems. The food safety assurance systems in Hong Kong developed to protect consumers could benefit China as a whole and other developing countries.

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1. Introduction

Hong Kong, a special administrative region in China, is a large consumer-oriented international city with a population approaching 7.1 million (Census and Statistics Department Bulletin, 2012). Hong Kong's tourism industry is very prosperous, with a record almost 42 million visitors in 2011 (<http://www.yearbook.gov.hk/2010/en/pdf/E09.pdf> HKSAR, 2013).

This megacity demands an enormous quantity of different kinds of food, more than 95% of which is imported from abroad (<http://www.yearbook.gov.hk/2010/en/pdf/E09.pdf> HKSAR, 2013). Food safety is a complex issue in China, presenting challenges to central government regulators. It has affected people's health and has significantly influenced China's food trade and international reputation (Liu, Xie, Zhang, Cao, & Pei, 2013). As a "food paradise," Hong Kong was first in the list of the top top 10 food safety cities in China in 2012 (China Institute of City Competitiveness, 2012). Hong Kong is famous for its food safety; the overall food safety rate was 99.7% for the past 6 years and was due to the city's effective food safety

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Table 1
Food safety report issued by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) from 2007 to 2012.

Year	No. of reports	No. of samples tested	No. of qualifications	Quality rate (%)
2007 ^a	6	65,000	64,676	99.50%
2008 ^a	6	65,300	65,067	99.64%
2009 ^a	12	60,500	60,285	99.64%
2010 ^a	12	61,300	61,131	99.72%
2011 ^a	12	1,26,900	1,26,723	99.86%
2012 ^a	12	1,15,500	1,15,385	99.90%
Total	60	4,94,500	4,93,267	99.75%

^a Source of data: Food Safety Report of Centre of Food Safety of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administration Region (2007–2012), <http://www.cfs.gov.hk/index.html>.

assurance systems. Therefore, studying the food safety control system of Hong Kong would benefit China in general.

Effective food safety assurance systems are essential to maintain the safety of domestic food and the safety of exported and imported food (Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization, 2006). We collected comprehensive relevant information concerning the food safety assurance systems in Hong Kong and investigated the supervisory system of total food safety in Hong Kong.

2. Status of food safety in Hong Kong

From 2009, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR) has released the "Food Safety Report" every month to allow the public to obtain the latest food safety information. CFS has a fairly sound three-tier food surveillance (targeted food surveillance, routine food surveillance and seasonal food surveillance). All the samples were collected in retail, wholesale and import levels for chemical, radiological approach and microbiological tests. According to the food safety reports issued by the CFS from 2007 to 2012 (Table 1), 494,500 food samples were tested: 493,267 were found satisfactory and the overall rate was 99.75%. About 80,000 food samples were tested, with 10 samples per 1000 people in 1 year. The food surveillance programme revealed that the overall satisfactory rate of food products in Hong Kong was maintained at a high level.

3. Organization system of food safety assurance in Hong Kong

3.1. Functions of Hong Kong's official food regulation agencies

The HKSAR is separated into executive, legislative, and judicial powers. In the administrative structure, the decision-making and executive functions are separated. The HKSAR contains 12 policy bureaux, comprising 59 executive agencies. These policy bureaux are responsible for making policies and presenting bills. Executive agencies under the bureaux are responsible for executing policies and legislation. The directors of the policy bureaux are accountable to the Chief Executive; each secretary of the executive agencies is accountable to their director.

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) is the policy bureau in charge of food safety assurance and has the largest of staff in the HKSAR. Its function is to formulate relevant policies of food safety and provide high-quality health, food and environmental hygiene services for Hong Kong. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), and the Government Laboratory (GL) are the executing agencies in charge of specific work of food safety supervision. Here we summarize supervisory system for food safety in HKSAR in detail (Fig. 1).

The AFCD is primarily responsible for managing and promoting local agricultural products. In the food safety areas, this agency is mainly responsible for standardizing breeding of food agricultural products, preventing abuse of agricultural and veterinary products and monitoring animal disease and medication residue in animals. Because the local agriculture in Hong Kong is small and most of the food is supplied from outside the region, the primary responsibility for food safety supervision is the FEHD.

The responsibilities of the FEHD are to maintain a clean and hygienic living environment for people and ensure that the food sold is safe. The CFS was established by the FEHD in 2006 as a specialized government agency mainly responsible for food safety supervision from "farm to table," except for local farm products. The CFS consists of the Food Surveillance and Control Division (FSCD), the Risk Assessment and Communication Division (RACD) and the Centre Administration Division (CAD). The chief missions of the CFS are as follows:

- Food surveillance and certification
- Safety control of imported food
- Safety control of live food animals
- Management of Food Incidents
- Handling Food Complaints
- Assessing risks of certain categories of food
- Risk Communication
- Advises on food standards.

The GL is the only independent authoritative inspection agency in HKSAR; it provides a full range of analytical, investigatory and advisory services and support to enable departments and bureaux of the HKSAR to meet their responsibilities for law and order, public health and safety, environmental protection, government revenue, consumer interests and implementation of government policies. In food safety, the Food Safety and Quality Group (FSQG) of the GL provides testing services to support regular food surveillance. Test items of food safe supplied from GL are all certified by the Hong Kong Accreditation Service (HKAS), and all the data collected by the GL can be used as legal evidence for enforcement action and indictment.

Independence is an important guarantee for food safety (Lia, Qia, & Liu, 2010). The GL is independent of other functional departments of HKSAR, which is the outstanding feature different from administrations in mainland China and other countries. Besides the GL, the FSCD and FEHD also have agencies for food safety inspection, but these agencies have a clear division of work without repetitive detection and overlapping functions. According to specialty, detection relating to veterinary issues belong to the Veterinary Assay Office (VAO) of the FSCD, human disease and microbiology belong to the Sanitary Inspection Office (SIO) of the FEHD, and biological and chemical analyses belong to the GL. Test items and detection devices of these agencies do not overlap.

3.2. Characteristics of the organization of food safety assurance in Hong Kong

The most important feature of the Hong Kong safety assurance system is a unifying management with a high degree of centralization. The objective of food safety has been proposed to provide a target for operational food safety management in the whole food safety supply line "from farm to table", including "planting and breeding", "processing and manufacturing", "circulating" and "consuming" (Peter, 2008). This relatively single mode of food safety supervision adopted by the HKSAR is comprehensive and efficient. Food safety supervision agencies and detection agencies are attached to the same policy bureau. The FEHD is in complete charge of strategic decision making for food safety, formulating

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