



Food safety in everyday life: Shopping for vegetables in a rural city in Vietnam



Sigrid C.O. Wertheim-Heck^{a,b,*}, Gert Spaargaren^a, Sietze Vellema^c

^a Environmental Policy Group, Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b c/o Fresh Studio, 1A, Lane 275 Au Co, Hanoi, Viet Nam

^c Knowledge, Technology and Innovation Group, Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Vietnam
Food-safety
Agro-chemicals
Shopping practices
Consumer-trust
Wet-markets

Concerns about food safety influence the way in which Vietnamese consumers confront the question of where, how and from whom they buy their fresh vegetables. In this paper we analyze in what manner and to what extent existing shopping practices inhibit the adoption of modern retail based food safety strategies. Using a social practices theory based approach, we analyze in detail the sales practices of sellers and the purchasing practices of consumers in a Vietnamese provincial city. This study reveals how both sellers and buyers in wet-markets, Asian style fresh food markets, apply different sets of skills and knowledge, based on locality, personal contacts and private judgment, to match supply and demand in the context of food safety threats. Within the everyday practice of shopping for vegetables, trust is shown to be continuously reproduced along pre-given lines. Consumers do not easily look outside or move beyond their existing routines even when food safety concerns would urge them to do so. From these findings we conclude that in situations where wet-markets serve as the dominant channel for distributing and purchasing fresh food, the efficacy of government and retail induced food safety strategies depends on their articulation within existing food purchasing routines of Vietnamese consumers.

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1. Introduction

Food safety is a major social and political issue in Vietnam. Over the last decade, there has been an alarming increase in the inappropriate use of chemicals in agriculture (Van Hoi et al., 2009). This has resulted in a stream of food safety incidents, which are widely covered in the public media (Moustier et al., 2002; Hoang and Nakayasu, 2006).¹ Subsequently, Vietnamese consumers are anxious about the safety of the vegetables they consume on a daily basis, in particular with respect to the residues of agro-chemicals

(Figuié et al., 2004; Mergenthaler et al., 2006, 2009). To improve food safety and to restore trust among consumers, authorities in Vietnam promulgate policies that focus on the modernization of the food retail system (Moustier, 2006; Maruyama and Trung, 2007). Government authorities actively discourage wet-market retailing (wet-markets are fresh food markets commonly found in Asian countries, in which wet refers to the wet-floors due to the abundant use of water), while stimulating the development of modern supermarkets (Geertman, 2011), thus facilitating the establishment of consumer guidance systems like certification and labeling (Reardon et al., 2003; Gulati et al., 2005). However, despite ubiquitous food safety concerns among the general public and sustained policy interventions favoring super- and hyper-market development, the less regulated and less hygienic wet-markets remain the main shopping channel for fresh produce in Vietnam (Shepherd and Tam, 2008; Cadilhon et al., 2006; Maruyama and Trung, 2007).

The persistent dominance of wet-markets provides the context of our present study, which aims to investigate how Vietnamese citizens in their everyday lives are confronting the health risks and other side effects related to the consumption of fresh vegetables. By

* Corresponding author. c/o Fresh Studio, 1A, Lane 275 Au Co, Hanoi, Viet Nam. Tel.: +84 (0)4 37591 380, +84 (0)9 04496402 (mobile); fax: +84 (0)4 37591 381.

E-mail addresses: sigrid.wertheim@gmail.com (S.C.O. Wertheim-Heck), gert.spaargaren@wur.nl (G. Spaargaren), sietze.vellema@wur.nl (S. Vellema).

¹ Example: In July 2013, online newspaper Dantri reports on the 9th that increasing amounts of vegetables containing harmful chemicals are detected (<http://dantri.com.vn/suc-khoe/phat-hien-them-nhieu-mau-rau-nhiem-hoa-chat-doc-hai-752303.htm> – last accessed January 6, 2014), followed by another article the same month, on the 21st, that nearly 80% of the vegetable samples contain harmful agro-chemicals (<http://dantri.com.vn/suc-khoe/80-mau-rau-ngot-tam-thuoc-doc-757198.htm> – last accessed January 6, 2014).

applying a social practices approach, we are able to document the basis of the continued reproduction of trust in fresh food. This basis is to be found – so we argue – in the wet-markets as locale and setting for the daily routines of selling and buying fresh food. By providing a situated, in depth (micro) analysis of the everyday practices of ‘buying and selling fresh vegetables at the wet market’ we add to the existing body of predominantly (macro) institutional studies of food safety governance and retail modernization. Findings from our study contribute to the design of more effective vegetable retail modernization strategies in Vietnam and the broader Asian context.

1.1. Outline of the argument

We shortly introduce the social practice approach in Section 2. After a discussion of the research design and the applied methodologies (Section 3) we present the empirical results in Section 4. This empirical section pays attention to both the different types of sellers of vegetables and their strategies with regard to vegetable safety risks as well as to consumers and their ways of confronting food safety risks in everyday life. In Section 5 we provide a discussion of our main findings while exploring their relevance for food safety policies in Vietnam.

2. The social practices approach to consumption

The persistent dominance of wet-market retailing in providing vegetables indicates that the practice of buying and selling fresh vegetables is not simply shaped or dictated by institutional transformations within the overall system of food provision. For this reason we argue that the institutional governance approach, which implicitly privileges the agency of producers and value chains over the agency and power of consumers (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002), needs to be complemented with a consumption perspective that puts agency center stage. The consumption perspective used in most studies on agro-food networks tends to emphasize deliberate and conscious choice-making from the side of consumers (Goldman et al., 2002). This is not just the case in traditional marketing studies (Frewer and Van Trijp, 2007), but also in studies on the development of alternative food networks. In the latter kind of value-laden approaches to consumption behavior, citizen-consumers are assigned an active and positive role in the (re) shaping of agro-food networks (Lockie and Kitto, 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Sage, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Little et al., 2009). Also in the tradition of political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003) the active and transformative role of consumers is taken as a starting point for the analysis of social change in (food) systems.

In this paper we build on sociological studies on consumption, which emphasize the need to analyze consumption behavior not in terms of individual, rational decision-making, but rather as the shared, routinized, and taken for granted practices of groups of food consumers (Schatzki et al., 2001; Warde, 2005; Shove, 2010; Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren et al., 2012). Using an approach based on sociological theories of consumption, we thus explore a middle ground in between models that mainly regard consumption as the outcome of provision – like super-marketization and third-party auditing – on the one hand and models that emphasize or even prioritize the agency of individual consumers based on purposeful behavior – as in marketing studies and some studies on alternative food networks – on the other. Analyzing consumption in terms of social practices means treating concepts such as consumer perceptions, skills, and knowledge not just as categories that belong to individuals but also as concepts that can be meaningfully related to and explained with the help of the practices that are being

performed (Spaargaren, 2003, 2011; Fonte, 2008; Journal of Consumer Culture, 2011). Our sociological model emphasizes the situated and routinized character of the (shopping) behavior of (food) consumers (Warde and Southerton, 2012). Continuity and change of daily routines cannot be predicted from individual perceptions, opinions and behaviors of the participants to the practices. Well-established and cherished routines affect the nature of the performances displayed by actors in everyday life, often making the existing routines robust to change (Spaargaren et al., 2013) and their participants seemingly conservative (Heiskanen et al., 2007).

Fig. 1 displays our conceptual model, with the practice of ‘shopping at wet-markets’ being put in the center of the analytical attention. The practice can be approached from two analytical angles. When analyzing the ways in which the practice is performed by different groups of actors with specific lifestyles, the emphasis is on the ‘agency implied in the practice’. When analyzing the ways in which the practice is embedded in wider food chains and relevant (policy) networks – the so-called systems of provision that are connected to the practice – the emphasis is on the institutional dimension of the practice. When discussing the embedding of the practice in systems of provision, we emphasize the nature of the practice as being a ‘consumption junction’: a place and time where system rationalities meet life-world rationalities (Schwartz-Cowan, 1987; Fine, 2002). In short: performances of actors at vegetable consumption junctions are regarded of key importance when understanding the ways in which food-risk issues are confronted and dealt with both at the personal and the systemic level.

Applying a social practices approach to the management of food-risks and anxieties in the context of wet-markets is innovative for different reasons. First, research on food practices beyond OECD countries (Oosterveer et al., 2007; Kantamaturapoj et al., 2013) to date focuses mainly on supermarkets (Hong Nguyen et al., 2013), while wet-markets thus far dominate vegetable selling and buying not only in Vietnam, but also in wider South-East Asia (Humphrey, 2007). Second, when shifting analytical attention from supermarkets to wet-markets, also the available repertoires for the management of food risks turn out to be crucially different. Instead of the objectified information on food safety as exemplified by labels and certification systems in supermarkets, wet-markets are characterized by personal, face-to-face mechanisms and relationships, which form the basis for sustaining trust in food.

Our in-depth investigation of the social practices of buying and selling fresh vegetables at wet-markets in Vietnam aims to explore the taken for granted strategies that actors apply when confronting food safety risks. In normal situations, so we argue, trust in food results from the co-production of both salesmen and consumers during everyday interaction. When practices are de-routinized however, as in the case of food scandals or other ‘fatal moments’ in food provision (Beck, 2006), the basis of trust becomes subject to discussion and conscious (re)considerations. De-routinization can result from sudden changes but as well from orchestrated changes in the practice, for example when wet-markets are (temporarily) displaced in order to enforce the shift to shopping in ‘safe’ supermarkets (Vittersø et al., 2005). In both cases, the existing routine interactions between sellers and buyers at pre-determined spaces and times fall into crisis, become at least temporarily obsolete, and start going through processes of change and reconsolidation (Brunori et al., 2012).

Since food crises and scandals in the Asian contexts are such regular events and since national food-safety policies aim to facilitate the shift to shopping in supermarkets, the continued popularity of wet-markets, at first sight, seems a puzzling phenomenon. Why stick to established routines when safer alternatives seem readily available? What characteristics of the practice of shopping at wet-markets may account for their continued reproduction

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