

Title: *“Experts’ analysis of food safety incidents and related challenges in China”*

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Expert: Chen Junshi (member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, researcher at the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, renowned expert in nutrition and food safety)

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Abstract:

During the 2007 National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Chen Junshi, a the Conference member, explained his point of view in an interview about food safety incidents and the challenges of food safety in China. He emphasized the fact that the current situation is not as dire as some imagine.

1. Confusion between main problems and secondary ones

According to the definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO), a food safety problem is a public health problem that occurs when toxic or harmful substances present in food products have a negative impact on the consumer’s health. The most important question is therefore the agricultural origin of the product. Chemical pollution or additives are secondary problems, though they have been in the media so often, they have come to be perceived as the most serious problems. The “Sudan Red”¹ incident is an excellent example of how consumers can be over-sensitive to food safety problems.

2. Irrational fear of food additives

Food additives are natural substances or chemical compounds that are used in food products to improve their colour, smell, taste, or even quality, as well as to meet conservation standards and adhere to food processing procedures. They form the foundations of the modern food industry and are therefore present in almost every food product. The CAC (Codex Alimentarius Commission) has compiled a list of more than 1,500 additives. China has far fewer because its food industry lags behind that of other industrialised nations. Each country uses a rigorous authorisation and control system for these additives. All additives are safe when used according to the regulations.

3. Causes and consequences of the improper use of food additives

Improper use or even abuse of additives may occur since the Chinese food industry is made up of numerous small companies, and food producers do not always feel compelled to abide by the laws. There are hundreds of millions of farmers in China, and it is difficult to measure how well government standards and norms are being applied. This problem will only be solved when agricultural production and the food sector have restructured and undergone radical improvements. There are four main problems concerning additives: (1) the illegal use of unauthorised additives; (2) a use of additives that does not adhere to government standards; (3) the excessive use of additives; (4) the use of additives that are not necessarily toxic but that have not yet been authorised.

4. Assessment errors in the food safety domain

Many food safety incidents are not actually real food safety problems. For that, two simultaneous factors are necessary: the presence of toxic or harmful substances and a confirmed negative impact on the consumer’s health. Many assessment errors are currently being made in this domain. First, the consumer demands products that are 100% safe, but no product can ever be 100% safe. Second, chemical pollution is too strongly emphasised while food poisoning is often neglected. Third, poor quality counterfeit products are often taken as proof of a lack of food safety,

¹ In reference to the media frenzy in China this year around revelations that Sudan Red dye was used in seasonings by the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain. This dye is considered to be dangerous and carcinogenic.

an example of this being the “fake milk powder” incident in Fuyang, Anhui province, which was not really a food safety problem. Fourth, products that are polluted with carcinogenic substances are wrongly believed to be carcinogenic, when in fact products that contain Sudan Red dye are not carcinogenic in and of themselves. Fifth, products that do not adhere to health standards are considered to be toxic. Though Nestlé milk powder contains iodine quantities that exceed the established norm, the product itself is not toxic.

5. Resolving food safety problems using a risk analysis framework

The goal is not to deny that food safety problems exist but rather to admit that they may be blown out of proportion. Food safety problems can be resolved by the use of a three-part risk analysis: risk estimation, risk management, information sharing about the risk. China does not currently have sufficiently fluid communication channels or an authoritative organisation that could evaluate risk or lend weight to the opinions of different experts when those opinions diverge. Information about risks must be exchanged at each level, expert, government and media, with special attention given to the media since they must report the facts as professionally as possible. Risk management requires that food safety not only be based on tests, but also be the result of food product traceability throughout the production process, right up to the consumer’s dinner plate. Under the framework of the tenth five-year plan, China mainly developed key techniques for controlling food safety. Under the framework of the eleventh five-year plan, China will probably be more interested in developing risk estimation techniques.

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