

Food Safety for Thought

University Students' Perceptions of How to Deal with Food Risks

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore food safety risk perceptions of students at Peking University and to what extent they influence their food consumption behaviour. Apart from existing research about food safety and consumer behaviour, the study relied on findings from thirteen interviews and participant observation. Since much of food safety involves risks, Ulrich Beck's risk society theory was therefore applied to conceptualise the empirical data. The study found that the students perceived food safety as a major health risk, even if some of them displayed an unwillingness to openly acknowledge it. The main concern was that producers deliberately added dangerous additives in food to gain more profit, which could cause potentially serious health afflictions. To deal with risks, the students controlled expiry dates on food products, avoided street food vendors and unclean restaurants, consulted friends and websites and bought food brands and visited restaurants with a good reputation. Eleven interviewees had changed their respective eating habits, mainly by avoiding the San Lu dairy brand and semi-prepared food products, because of food safety incidents in the past. Risk society theory was imperative to understand risk-related perceptions and behaviour, but could not be functional at all times.

Keywords: food safety, risk perception, consumer behaviour, students, Peking University, risk society theory

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

APSL - Agricultural Production Safety Law

AQSIQ - State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

CCTV – Closed Circuit Television

CBN – Christian Broadcasting Network

FAAR - Food Addition Administrative Regulation

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization

FLR – Food Label Regulation

FPMQSSR - Food Producing Manufacturer Quality and Safety Supervision Regulation

FSL – Food Safety Law

HACCP - Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points

KFC – Kentucky Fried Chicken

MOA – Ministry of Agriculture

MOC - Ministry of Commerce

MOH – Ministry of Health

NPC - National People’s Congress

PQL – Product Quality Law

PSC - Politburo Standing Committee

SAIC - State Administration of Industry and Commerce

SCFSC - State Council Food Safety Commission

SFDA - State Food and Drug Administration

TPB – Theory of Planned Behaviour

UN OCHR – United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

WHO – World Health Organization

FOREWORD

Writing this master's thesis has been a much enlightening experience, but also a long and challenging journey. In terms of scholarly impact, I modestly hope that my findings will contribute with some new interesting viewpoints regarding the relationship between food safety risk perception and consumer behaviour in contemporary China.

Firstly, I would profoundly like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Annika Pissin, a brilliant and witty person and scholar. During the entire writing process you have been immensely helpful and also shown a great deal of interest for my research. Your knowledge and skilful supervision, conveyed in the form of interesting discussions, encouragement and insightful advice, enabled me to clarify my oscillating thoughts and always steered me into the right direction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first chapter outlines the research problem, the main purpose of the study and what specific questions are to be further investigated. In addition, the terms food safety and safe food are briefly explained and a disposition summarises the contents of the thesis.

1.1. Research problem

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), food safety has come to represent a widespread global health concern. Millions of people are every year affected by having consumed foodstuffs contaminated with harmful substances. The most serious outbreaks of foodborne disease occur in developing economies, but annually 5-10 % of the populace in industrialised nations are falling ill or die from food-related hazards (WHO 1999).

With regards to China, the anxiety for deteriorating food safety is constantly growing. On the global market, China is a large producer of fruit and vegetables, but has at times been prohibited to export certain food products to Japan and European countries because of low quality standards (Calvin et al. 2005: 17). On domestic markets, food safety became a major health issue between 2003 and 2006, due to numerous discoveries of food products polluted with dangerous substances or fake additives (Wang et al. 2008: 27).

Despite that the authoritarian Chinese party-state exercises strict political control over the media, news of food safety problems are frequently seeping out to the general population. To name a few of the best known incidents reported in both foreign and domestic media channels are the cancer-causing poisons found in Lee Kum Kee's oyster sauce in 2003 and also the baby milk formula scandal in 2004, where several hundred young children in Anhui died from malnourishment due to fake additives (Ho et al. 2006: 245).

In 2008, particularly two events resulted in major headlines nationwide. In the first, milk powder adulterated with melamine made 300 000 infants fall ill and killed a handful of children. In the second, widespread cases of pork meat tainted with the dangerous substance clenbuterol were revealed (Zhou 2011).

In 2011, the police in Shenyang appropriated 40 tonnes of beansprouts contaminated with the toxic chemical sodium nitrite. Twelve people were arrested for having added these elements to make the vegetables grow faster and to appear of better quality (Foster 2011).

In 2013, nine hundred people were arrested in several Chinese cities since they had sold meat advertised as lamb, but instead it contained fox and rat (Kaiman 2013). Continuing scandals involve restaurants that utilise cooking oil that has been recycled from food sewage drains. This kind of “gutter oil” might have a potentially serious health effect, as it often contains carcinogens (Li 2011).

The main reasons behind these problems were that food producers deliberately added prohibited chemicals in the processing stages to generate more profit and also that the foodstuffs were produced in unhygienic settings (Zhou and Jin 2013: 12, 16). Indeed, in 2012, food safety constituted one of the major public issues of the Chinese population. In a survey, consisting of 1593 answered questionnaires undertaken by the Public Opinion Research Laboratory and Crisis Management Center of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the respondents answered that their worst fear involved bad hygiene and illegal or harmful adulterations in the food supply chain. Furthermore, the participants believed that the responsible actors to blame were smaller and larger enterprises (Wang 2012b).

Over the last thirty years, China has experienced a tremendous economic growth and industrial development alongside a mass-migration of hundreds of millions of people from rural to urban areas (Ho et al. 2006: 245). These changes have had an extensive impact on people’s lives. The immense dependency of coal to produce energy and the increasing numbers of car owners have resulted in air pollution being a mounting environmental and health problem in large cities (Kan et al. 2009: 187). The multiple increases in incomes among urban middle class households together with a diversified food market have made people replacing the previous rice-based diet with larger quantities of meat and fish, eggs, milk products, fruits and vegetables (French and Crabbe 2010: 46-51).

Today, young urban middle class adults in China, in the age-range between 18 and 25, are growing up to experience a rapidly transforming socio-economic environment. While living standards are improving, food safety and air pollution are at the same time becoming proliferating health concerns. Since these individuals are neither children nor adults, they are

positioned in a fluid state of searching for meaning in their lives and a place within society. Being in a process of entering adulthood, they are vulnerable and susceptible to influences from various channels, such as the media, the government, the education system, friends and family. Depending on what opinions and perceptions they establish during these years might affect their future behaviour.

From that point of view, university students are a particularly interesting group. Deliens et al. point out that the enhanced freedom young adults receive when they enrol at university could lead to unhealthier eating habits. In an attempt to investigate food consumption patterns of Belgian university students, they found that taste, convenience, price, social networks, the media and location of residence were essential influencing factors (2014: 1-2). Furthermore, students are important to study in the sense that they might successively take on influential positions and earn relatively high incomes, which will enable them to contribute with positive changes for the long-term direction of China and make demands as consumers.

For a further understanding of university students' food choices it is paramount to study their risk behaviour. What attitudes do they share regarding the current food safety situation in China? What are their perceptions of food safety risks? Do they think about food in terms of safety or whether certain food products might pose impending health risks? Are they considering changing their eating habits as a consequence of known food poisonings or the fact that their mothers do not prepare their food anymore?

1.2. Research aim

During the past thirty years, the diets of the Chinese urban middle class have dramatically changed. The higher consumption of meat, processed products, already prepared meals and other foodstuffs that are rich in fat, sugar and salt together with more hectic lifestyles have made people more unhealthy (French and Crabbe 2010: 82-86). Moreover, because of some of the above-mentioned and other serious domestic food adulteration incidents in recent years, food safety has become a major health problem in China. Considering the probability of being directly affected by hazardous food contaminations in combination with more globalised lifestyles and eating habits, the intent is to investigate whether the students think of food in terms of safety and health aspects. The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore what perceptions students at Peking University have of food safety

risks. Lastly, a further aim is to examine in what manner knowledge about potential health problems influence their food consumption behaviour.

1.3. Research questions

The overarching research question is as follows:

- What perceptions do university students have of food safety risks?

In addition, three sub-questions will be examined:

- In what manner does knowledge about potentially serious health afflictions influence university students' food consumption behaviour?
- Do university students think about food in terms of safety and health aspects?
- What food do university students consume?

1.4. Definitions of food safety and safe food

This study focuses on food safety. Food safety is not the same as food security or safe food. Food safety involves how food quality and health-related aspects to food intake can be assured. Food security deals with how the structure of food production and distribution can be safeguarded (Zhou and Jin 2013: 1-2). "Safe food" is a term for agricultural products that are free from dangers and grown with organic or environmentally friendly methods (Liu et al. 2013: 93-94).

Henson and Traill (1993: 153) explain that food safety can be described as "the inverse of food risk – the probability of not suffering some hazards from consuming the food in question". The definition also encompasses implementations from national authorities to guarantee that foodstuffs "during production, handling, storage, processing, and distribution are safe, wholesome and fit for human consumption; conform to safety and quality requirements; and are honestly and accurately labelled as prescribed by law" (FAO and WHO 2003: 3).

1.5. Disposition

In total, this thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research problem, the aim of the study, the questions to be answered as well as a brief explanation of food safety and safe food. In order to create a context for the empirical study, the second chapter examines food choices against the backdrop of expanding food markets, changing lifestyles and important factors that influence consumer behaviour. Moreover, food safety awareness is examined from the viewpoints of hazards in the food supply chain, the restricted access to food safety information in an authoritarian media environment and current governmental laws, regulations and policies to improve food safety and public consciousness. Thus, food diversity, increasing threats in food production and difficulties for the public to receive adequate food safety information are closely related topics, as they help to determine how people perceive risks and what foodstuffs they choose to consume. The third chapter reviews Ulrich Beck's risk society theory so as to better understand the relationship between risk perceptions and behaviour. The fourth chapter explains the motivation for the choices of meta-theory, research design and data collection methods and also considers aspects of transparency, originality and ethics. The fifth chapter presents the interviewees and scrutinises the empirical data from a broader theoretical risk perspective. The sixth chapter discusses distinguishing patterns in the research findings and ends with some final conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: FOOD MARKET AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

In order to offer a background for the empirical study, this chapter explores food consumption behaviour from the perspectives of globalised and diversified food markets, improving living standards as well as cultural, social and psychological factors. Furthermore, food safety awareness is investigated in the wake of current hazards in the food supply chain, restrictions in the media to publish food safety news and governmental laws, regulations and policies to improve food safety and general consciousness. Thus, the wider selection of food choices, the increasing dangers related to conflicts in food production together with a media environment that is constrained from freely publishing food safety information and also governmental policies to improve food safety, are all important topics that serve to better understand how people perceive risks and what food they consume.

2.1. Expanding food markets: A brief historical overview

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the wellbeing of urban citizens was taken care of by work units controlled by the party-state. The access to foodstuffs, such as rice, was managed by a strict distribution system through rationing coupons (Latham 2007: 226). When people wanted to purchase food or other basic consumer goods, they had to go to state-run markets that offered limited options (Veeck and Veeck 2000: 459). This period was characterised by socialist frugality and agricultural production therefore solely focused on simple grains and a few kinds of vegetables that varied depending on the season. During winter, the available produces simply often consisted of turnips and potatoes (Veeck 2000: 109).

In the early 1980s, a specific change of events helped to increase the productivity within agriculture. Hence, the government implemented a set of land reforms that divided the agricultural collectives into smaller households. Farming families were now free to decide what crops to cultivate and they could also keep all the potential earnings. Grain still remained the basic cornerstone of the Chinese diet, but the production of oil, sugar and meat rapidly intensified (Naughton 2007: 240-242). At the same time, entrepreneurs were permitted to engage in trade of alimentary products and consumer goods. In only a few years, business activities evolved from simple “free” markets into shops (Latham 2007: 226-227). The economic reforms created a huge upsurge of small grocery stores that sold everything from noodles to cigarettes and beverages. Today, in all urban districts there are shopping areas, where licenced merchants offer fresh and prepared food and farmers bring vegetables, tofu and meat to sell (Veeck and Veeck 2000: 459).

During the 1990s, both international and national supermarkets started to appear in cities throughout China. In the beginning of the 2000s, international and well-established food stores, for example Carrefour, were permitted to expand their businesses without having to collaborate with Chinese partners. As a consequence, a rising demand from domestic wholesalers emerged to supply these retailers with various processed, canned and frozen products (Veeck et al. 2010: 224). The development of the food industry has also had a large impact on the restaurant environment. Especially noteworthy is the arrival of the outlets Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in 1987 and McDonald’s in 1992, which triggered a massive popularity for both domestic and international fast food alternatives (French and Crabbe 2010: 105-111).

Since Western influences often are seen as steps towards modernisation, Yan suggests that the fondness and consumption of foreign products is steadily growing. Thus, one could argue that the cultural value has much benefited international fast food restaurants and McDonald's in particular (2006: 45). In the wake of frequent food safety incidents, Chinese consumers have also started to turn their gaze towards imported food products and brands, especially from Europe and the U.S. (Wang 2012a).

More than three decades of economic development and social transformations in China have altered the eating habits of the urban population. The large number of food retailers and restaurants, the greater selection of foodstuffs on the market, more demanding working lives and also higher disposable incomes are contributing factors to the changing lifestyle patterns (Veeck and Veeck: 2000: 457). As stated by French and Crabbe, a negative side of the changing diets among the urban middle class is that overweight and obesity represent an enhanced burden for the Chinese healthcare system (2010: 206-207). However, even though globalised food markets have increased the consumption of unhealthy convenience food in China, the food production and distribution system is responsible for far worse consequences.

2.2. Flaws in the food supply chain

The food supply chain in China comprise of production, processing, storage and logistics, retail and consumption. The agricultural sector is the primary source of food (Zhou and Jin 2013: 15-20). Food safety risks often have its origin here since farmers depend on dangerous chemical pesticides to force production out of land (Calvin et al. 2005: 18). In China, the average fertilizer rate utilised in agriculture is today estimated to be nearly double the international safety standard of 225 kg per hectare (ibid: 2013: 15). This is often explained by a low awareness of the potential health problems pesticides might cause or which amounts are appropriate to utilise for different crops (China Dialogue 2013).

Farmers rely on antibiotics to prevent disease in the breeding and handling of sheep, pigs, poultry, cows, fish and seafood (Calvin et al. 2005: 18). At the same time, contaminations of crops occur when polluted water from industries or human sewage is used (ibid: 2005: 18). However, Zhou and Jin stress that the most crucial aspect is that food safety supervision in rural areas lack resources to be well organized (2013: 15). Millions of small food producers operate on a low-scale basis without documentation and are therefore difficult

to control (ibid: 2005: 18). Even though many serious threats develop during agricultural production it is also necessary to have a closer look at the processing stage.

Reflecting on the nature of food safety scandals in China, Zhou and Jin suggest that the processing stage is the essential source of blame (2013: 16). Thus, the focus on food consumption in China has shifted more towards processed and pre-cooked meals (Yan 2012: 713). The major risks are that food producers purposely add counterfeited or illegal poisonous ingredients and poor hygienic standards also result in high levels of microbiological dangers (ibid: 2013: 16). Yan argues that adulteration is the most frequently used method to make food harmful. As incentives to increase the profit margins, food producers reduce the dosages of original ingredients with cheaper alternatives (2012: 710). To make the food products seem more desirable and prolong their expiry dates, hazardous toxins are therefore utilised (Bai et al. 2007: 481). Illegal hormones are often also added to improve the characteristics of meat (ibid: 2012: 710-711). Another source of peril is foodstuffs that have been produced with entirely fake ingredients, such as milk powder. Commonly, cheap toxic substances are here functioning as replacements (ibid: 2012: 712).

Due to lack of supervision, the present food management system allows these scandals to continue. Since the first step of processing is rapid and does not generate high revenues, overseeing agencies often tend to neglect it (Zhou and Jin 2013: 16). In later stages, producers have to meet strict quality and safety requirements and at the same try to reduce their expenses. With an inefficient enforcement of laws and regulations, enterprises are able to commit illegal acts and to pay less attention to hygienic levels (ibid: 2013: 16-17). In addition, the relative inexpensiveness and low technological demands to become a food producer has resulted in a rapid upsurge in businesses in recent years. Such an intense expansion makes food safety very difficult to regulate (ibid: 2013: 16-17).

In the storage and logistics stage, microbiological contaminations are the main hazards. The contributing factors are poor hygiene, slow distribution channels and a lack of appropriate refrigerating equipment. In retailing, food safety issues arise due to low sanitation levels and out-dated refrigerating systems. In the consumption stage, incidents are seldom (Zhou and Jin 2013: 17-19). Yet, even though the threats in the food production and distribution system are growing in intensity, they will remain hidden unless the media do not properly inform the general public about potential dangers.

2.3. The media and food safety information

The media is often the main channel with which to become aware of worldly events (Talbot 2007: 3). Seward II emphasises that a population normally acquires news about food safety from the media, which makes it an institution that has the power to influence opinions. Accordingly, consumers differ in ages, cultural and social backgrounds, incomes and education levels. Regarding food they might therefore associate what “safe food” is differently (2003: 3). As of frequent media attention, McCluskey and Swinnen contend that this could affect how consumers perceive food products and certain risks and also make them demand other product alternatives (2011: 624).

Due to the fact that most consumers in China come in contact with incidents through the media instead of being personally involved, Yang believes that the media and food safety are closely related. In addition, the great deal of information about food safety on the internet indicates that it has become a common topic of debate. More specifically, when he typed the word food safety (shipin anquan 食品安全) into the Chinese web browser Baidu (百度), it generated 90 million results in 2012 (2013: 337-339).

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has surrendered its dominance of the media in favour of a regulated commercialisation, where news outlets are now allowed to finance their business by advertisements (Shirk 2011: 1). Yet, the majority of all media are owned by the party-state and must therefore comply with rigorous directives of what issues that are not too sensitive to report about, otherwise they might face severe retributions (Freedom House 2013 China). Even though the media landscape has become more varied and oriented at satisfying the demands of different audiences, it still functions as an important political mouthpiece. Hence, media reports might contain varying content, but they generally follow the agenda of the government (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011: 441-442).

Notwithstanding the extensive media coverage of food safety in China, the San Lu melamine tainted milk powder incident is an example that was revealed solely due to massive persistence from citizens. Even when news about the incident had already spread, influential enterprises and political actors still tried to limit the information channels (Yang 2013: 337). Spears and Lawrence argue that the most important reason why so many infants and children could be affected is because of the intentional reluctance to provide the population with

adequate knowledge (2008). For example, one of the largest accused dairy producers asked help from the government to conceal information and to handle bad media publicity (Blanchard 2008). Hence, the first consumer complaints occurred in March, but it was not until September when specific news reports started to circulate and turn into a national outcry. Since the media and journalists were restricted to publish news in the developing phases of the crisis, this shows that there is a lack of transparency (Xin 2010: 338-339).

Problematically, as the government is obstructive in its release of food safety information, Jia and Jukes assert that false rumours might therefore spread on the Internet (2013: 244). As an example, in 2013, Nongfu Spring, a large domestic retailer of bottled water made public complaints that journalists at the newspaper *Beijing Times* had published false reports about their water quality. Albeit the accuracy of the incident was never clarified, a Communist Party representative of the All-China Journalists Association, Di Huisheng, announced that actions should be taken to convict corrupted journalists (Boehler 2013).

With the intention to facilitate an awareness of the positive and negative aspects of the consumer environment in contemporary China, it was essential to examine the main characteristics of the food market, the most serious threats in the food supply chain as well as the manner in which the media hamper people's knowledge about potential food safety risks. Thus, these are all important factors that Chinese consumers are faced to deal with. Nonetheless, in order to become more conscious of the underlying mechanisms behind why people prefer to purchase or consume different kinds of food, it is fundamental to have a closer look at consumer behaviour.

2.4. Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is best described as “the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires” (Solomon et al. 2006: 27). Kotler et al. clarify that it is difficult to understand consumer behaviour since there exist several kinds of behaviours and each one of them are influenced by different dynamics (2009: 243).

As referred to by Blythe, culture is a complex and deeply embedded cluster of beliefs and activities shared by a larger group of people, for example language, food and customs. As it incorporates our whole existence, he thus believes that it is a powerful influencing factor of consumer behaviour (2013: 189-207).

Social characteristics, such as family and friends might directly also affect purchasing decisions. Families are significant in the sense that they help to shape economic viewpoints and personal ambitions (Kotler et al. 1999: 235-236).

Personal factors, for instance age, occupation and economic situation are worth taking into consideration. People of different ages have different preferences for food and consumer goods. The occupation of individuals has a strong impact on their financial status, because it offers the ability to permit more or less expensive purchases (Kotler et al. 1999: 238-240).

Hawkins and Mothersbaugh state that lifestyle is a decisive aspect, as it is a mirror of how a person leads his or her lives. Since the concept embraces previous experiences, personality characteristics and present life events, they declare that it has a stimulating effect on consumption choices. Though consumers are rarely aware that their lifestyles have an enormous bearing on how they consume (2010: 434-435).

Personality is shaped by a distinctive set of individual characteristics that relate to how individuals express themselves within society. Unsurprisingly, personalities often change over time and a person could act differently depending on the circumstances (Kardes et al. 2011: 162-163). Apart from the previously mentioned cultural, social and personal characteristics, psychological factors are also believed to have a major effect on food choices.

2.4.1. Attitudes and motivation

Kraus explains that attitudes are important, because they have the possibility to guide and predict future behaviours (1995: 58). They reflect an individual's psychological mind-set and can be regarded as strong feelings towards items or notions (Kotler et al. 1999: 249). Attitudes comprise of cognitive, affective and behavioural constituents. The cognitive constituent is associated with one's viewpoints about something. For example, a specific brand of beef might be considered to be of particularly high quality (Hawkins and

Mothersbaugh 2010: 392). The affective constituent symbolises the feelings towards an item. For example, if a person states that he or she likes or dislikes a particular dairy brand (ibid: 2010: 395). The behavioural constituent can be described as the consumer's predisposition to act in a certain manner concerning an item or concept. On the one hand, it reflects the evaluating decisions to purchase or not to purchase a specific vegetable or fruit brand. On the other hand, it involves seeking out information about the product or to recommend it to acquaintances (ibid: 2010: 397-398).

Motivation is another psychological characteristic that can help to explain why people behave in a certain manner (Solomon et al. 2006: 90). Hawkins and Mothersbaugh offer an ample explanation when affirming that it is “an unobservable inner force that stimulates and compels a behavioural response and provides specific direction to that response” (2010: 360). Motivation occurs when a need is stimulated to such a level that it must be satisfied. When a need has been acknowledged, tension will push a person to reduce or extinguish it (ibid: 2006: 90-91). Hence, motivation helps people to identify what is relevant and also affects their feelings. For example, a person who really wants to eat healthy food products is determined to satisfy that need and will also observe any information and advertisements about such products as relevant (ibid: 2010: 360). Evidently, attitudes and motivation are important factors to guide consumer behaviour. But before being able to create an opinion of a phenomenon or engaging in a specific behaviour, one must indeed gain some kind of knowledge.

2.5. Food safety awareness and education policies

In 2013, the market research institute Ipsos together with the CBN Group (Christian Broadcasting Network) conducted a large investigation of food safety consciousness and opinions among citizens aged between 18-50 in six Chinese cities. The results showed a 75% attentiveness of the interviewees concerning the nationwide food scandals, for example the baby milk formula tainted with melamine and the pork meat contaminated with clenobuterol. 99% of the respondents answered that they planned to change their food consumption behaviour because of food scandals. In addition, more than 80% of the informants paid attention to food safety aspects when eating in restaurants and shopping for groceries. Especially evident was that more than 50% of the respondents from educated and well-to-do families were opting for imported food brands. The reason why international food products

were seen more desirable was mainly due to higher safety and hygienic standards (79%), natural contents (74%) and that they do not contain any illegal additives (68%). The majority of the informants answered that they wanted to buy food products of high quality. For 83% of the respondents quality meant natural foodstuffs or products that were processed under strict regulations and high levels of hygiene. For 80% of the respondents it meant no illegal food additives (Ipsos and CBN Group).

WHO and FAO decree that media and education are important means to improve the knowledge of consumers, food producers and government employees (FAO and WHO 2003: 9). In addition, Ni and Zeng express that governmental agencies need to deliver more transparency to food safety issues. Since food producers often are unwilling to offer information, they believe that it is almost impossible for consumers to better understand the complex food supply chain. Correspondingly, the government has a responsibility to function as an important link between these actors, both to pressure enterprises to provide information and to improve food safety consciousness in consumers (2009: 1990).

Regarding raising awareness, the State Council Food Safety Commission (SCFSC) has implemented a five-year education strategy to proliferate the public knowledge about food safety in China between 2011-2015. The purpose is to ensure that more than 80% of the population have obtained a sufficient understanding when the program terminates (Xinhua 2011). This will be accomplished by every year guaranteeing at least 40 hours of training to employers and workers in the food industry as well as governmental staff. The education will deal with legal, ethical and technical aspects of food safety. In addition, for the sake of enhancing the consciousness of the public, close relationships will be established with consumers, the media, government agencies and different food retailers (Xinhua 2011).

Despite the good intentions of the government, one must argue that this education policy seems rather vague in description. Therefore, it would be very interesting to find out more about how genuinely the plan has been applied. Regarding more concrete ways to strengthen food safety, the Chinese government has implemented several laws and regulations.

2.6. Governmental food safety laws, regulations and supervision

In China, the legal system of food is built upon the Food Safety Law (FSL), the Product Quality Law (PQL) and the Agricultural Production Safety Law (APSL). Moreover, the Food Producing Manufacturer Quality and Safety Supervision Regulation (FPMQSSR), the Food Label Regulation (FLR), the Food Addition Administrative Regulation (FAAR) and other local regulations work as extensions to the main laws (Ming 2012: 4). The present food safety management in China is characterised by a disintegrated division of agencies and departments, each with different responsibilities. The most important bodies are the State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA), the Ministry of Health (MOH), the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ), the Ministry of Commerce (MOC), the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (SAIC) (Li et al. 2010: 292).

In 2009, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) of the National People's Congress (NPC) passed the Food Safety Law. The legislation has the highest precedence and aims at warranting that food quality and safety conditions are met and also protecting consumers from health issues related to food intake (Jia and Jukes 2013: 238).

The Product Quality Law (PQL) was implemented in 2000 and deals with all foodstuffs available on the Chinese market. The law contains directives that producers and retailers have to comply to and legal rights protection of consumers. The legal framework is based on a comprehensive system of national criteria and guidelines to secure food quality and to prevent the population from consuming products that do not fulfil them (Ming 2012: 4-5).

The Agricultural Production Safety Law (APSL) was authorised in 2003 and encourages the state to improve the quality of alimentary products and to develop a system for compulsory quality requirements and environment protection. Besides, the law prohibits agricultural foodstuffs to be sold without having met these standards (Jia and Jukes 2013: 238).

As claimed by Liu et al., the escalating number of food safety alarms has created a greater demand for safer food alternatives (2013: 94). With the ambition to offer consumers labels that ensure quality and safety and to improve the knowledge of food production methods, the government has therefore implemented more than 1800 voluntary and 634 compulsory standards for all agricultural products in China (Zhou and Jin 2013: 9, 68).

Product-oriented standards include the “Three Products, One Indication” policy, where crops certified to be free from pollutants can only contain restricted amounts of artificial or chemical substances. Organic labelled food has to be cultivated without any utilisation of pesticides, waste products and food additives. Green food refers to products that are grown with environmental-friendly materials that are recyclable and do not contain any harmful toxins (Zhou and Jin 2013: 10, 69-71).

Processing-oriented standards, such as the internationally recognised HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) and ISO 9000, have been adopted to ensure consumers that food producers have obeyed safe procedures. For instance, HAACP is a system that covers strict requirements and documentation of all processed food products. However, this certification is only compulsory for frozen agricultural products intended for export outside of China (Zhou and Jin 2013: 69-71).

In order to provide a more multifaceted awareness of the present food consumption situation in China, it was crucial to study evolving food markets, hazards in the food industry and limitations in the media to freely report news about food safety. After having determined the obstacles Chinese consumers are faced with, it was also imperative to scrutinise principles that guide consumer behaviour and what measures the government has taken to improve food safety and public consciousness. Nonetheless, as much of food safety involves risks and how to prevent and avoid them, it would thus be impossible to understand food choices without first examining a risk behaviour theory.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RISK SOCIETY

This chapter motivates the decision to use an inductive theoretical approach. Furthermore, Ulrich Beck's risk society theory is reviewed and the main hypotheses are examined in order to become aware of risk-related perceptions and behaviour in a broader social context. The theoretical concepts will subsequently be applied to the empirical findings so as to find distinguishing similarities and differences between them.

3.1. Inductive theoretical approach

The strategy, in which this thesis has established a relationship between empirical material from primary sources and knowledge and theoretical concepts from secondary sources, could be ascribed to inductive theory. Induction is based on the assumption that a researcher first gathers data and then links the findings to a suitable theory (Bryman 2012: 26-27).

The planning of this thesis initiated almost three months prior to the intended period of data collection between February and April 2014 at Peking University. Hence, the author had much time to develop a hypothesis to be tested and also to select a theory. As the intent from the beginning was to examine how attitudes towards food safety influenced food consumption behaviour, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) therefore seemed appropriate. The choice could be motivated by the fact that this model is often used when the aim is to understand how attitudes affect consumer behaviour.

However, after having collected data from the student interviews, the author realised that the purpose of the TPB was better suited for large-scaled quantitative surveys in marketing and social psychology rather than smaller qualitative studies. Subsequently, it was inevitable to change direction and, through induction, try to find a theory applicable to the acquired findings. Since the concept of social risk was a distinguishable theme throughout the discussions about food safety and food consumption with the students, the decision came to rest on Ulrich Beck's risk society theory.

3.2. Risk society theory

3.2.1. From industrial society to risk society

According to the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, people in Western countries are currently facing a paradigm-shift, which is characterised by the transition from a traditional industrial society into a risk society. In exactly the same way as modern progress replaced the feudal societies with industrialised societies, it can hence be suggested that industrial societies now are transformed into a new modernity based on advanced science and technology (1992: 9-10).

Due to the increasing impact of globalisation, Beck proposes that non-Western nations are not spared from becoming risk societies either (1999: 3). In fact, the threats arising from industrial manufacturing are all universally connected. For example, acids in the air are transported across borders and affect forests and lakes in countries located far away from the place of origin (Beck 1992: 36).

Beck defines risks as an approach with which to handle insecurities that modernisation has created (1992: 21). He emphasises that epidemics and natural catastrophes could be as devastating as science, but they are inherently different from risks. The reason is that these phenomena neither derive from judgements that involve economic benefits nor the acceptance of impending threats as a negative aspect of industrial development. In pre-modern times, threats occurred because of unexplainable external circumstances, but industrial risks today are originating from technology and science created by people, enterprises and politicians (1999: 50). More specifically, risks consist of permanent hazards that mainly are invisible and imperceptible by definition, such as air and water pollution and toxic chemicals in food (ibid: 1992: 22).

In principle, the growth of wealth in industrial societies exceeds the number of manufactured dangers, while the situation in risk societies is the opposite. Even though rapid advances in technology and science generate several advantages, they are gradually being overthrown by new risks. In the beginning, the hazards can be seen as acceptable effects of development, but in the process of internationalisation, they will gain more significance in public discourses (Beck 1992: 12-13).

Commonly, it is agreed that both wealth and risks have a considerable impact on social classes within society. The main distinction is that wealth is amassed at the higher end of the strata, whereas risks at the lower end. Hence, poor people are more inclined to encounter risks than people who possess power, education and financial stability, because they can purchase their safety and liberty from problems (Beck 1992: 35).

Moreover, risks from modernisation could eventually affect the agents responsible for creating or drawing benefits from them. Therefore, a kind of boomerang effect might decrease the significance of social classes, as not even people with money or influence can be safe anymore. For example, large-scaled industrial cultivation of crops can make mothers in various cities produce breast milk with high levels of lead, something that would affect their children negatively. The intensive agriculture might also damage the arability of the soil and put an end to plants and animal life (Beck 1992: 37-38).

When risks enter the global arena, Beck suggests that everything in daily life can constitute a potential threat, such as the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe and the clothes we wear. Problematically, as the hazards emerge in an unstoppable manner and are impossible to notice, consumers no longer have the ability to make free decisions. When people feel victims in their situations, they could feel a sensation of helplessness or anger and turn critical towards technology (1992: 41). As a consequence, he declares that the value of knowledge grows and the media receive an important role to spread information about scientific research to the public. In a way, society develops into an advocate of information, media and technology (ibid: 1992: 46).

Since many of the hazards today are impalpable, they come to awareness through scientific explanations that people have difficulties to comprehend and relate to without any previous experiences (Beck 1992: 52). Scientists are crucial when it comes to distinguish between actual risks and how they should be perceived. Unfortunately, modern society has become divided into two camps of either experts and or laymen. Due to their power and expertise, researchers feel compelled to offer objective and logical definitions about dangers, whereas the public solely take on the position as perceiver (ibid: 1992: 57)

As the existing knowledge about risks was founded during a period of massive opposition towards technological development, experts can be criticised for lacking the essential skills to appropriately take action against them. The production of vulnerabilities is thus based on scientific and technological logic that focuses on the benefits of such advances. In that sense, there is an inability to see the risks. The people who foresee and explore the possibilities of economic efficacy are therefore astonished once they appear (Beck 1992: 57-60).

With the current state of technological autocracy, a change of direction is beyond the decision-making of political forces. Fittingly, the only solution is to become more democratic in dealing with science. The public must be given more scientific awareness and also allow legal and political technological institutions to reclaim the validity of their own judgements. Both laymen and experts have to collaborate and develop opinions and alternatives together (Beck 1999: 70). In addition, when wanting to become more conscious of how people perceive risks and in what manner they are translated into a behavioural change, the new wave of individualism in modern society must be taken into further consideration.

3.2.2. Institutional individualism

Beck voices that a significant aspect of risk society is that the problems resulting from modernisation generate threats towards social structures, identity and culture. Hence, an individualisation process takes place that will liberate people from their prior collective traditions of the industrial society, such as class belonging, family relations and gender roles (1992: 87). However, he does not define it as a matter of individuality or market independence, but instead an institutionalised individualisation (Beck 1999: 9). In that sense, social classes and family ties are not dissolved, but become less significant in personal life cycles. Furthermore, the autonomy of the individual is greatly challenged since the previous support and relationships are traded with the new limitations and controls that education, employment and consumption bring. All these factors help to shape the autobiography, but also establish a dependence of the market, the media, the education system and the social protection system (ibid: 1992: 131-132).

At the same time, when society turn out to be more privatised and institutionalised, every person must make various important choices that shape their lives, for instance career choice, whom to marry and location of residence. Consequently, it becomes inevitable to adopt a more egoistic worldview and learn how to make use of every opportunity in the best possible way (Beck 1992: 135-136). In terms of insecurities that might follow biographical decisions, individuals are confronted with panic. They can no longer rely on the assistance from traditional morals and relationship networks, but have to trust their own capabilities (ibid: 1992: 153).

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the ontological and epistemological considerations of the study and motivates the choice of research strategy and data collection methods. As to demonstrate that the research is trustworthy, transparent and follow good research ethics, validity and reliability, self-reflexivity, generalizability and ethical considerations are scrutinised.

4.1. Meta-theoretical choices

In terms of epistemology and ontology, this thesis conforms to the viewpoints of interpretivism and constructivism (Bryman 2012: 380). In order to gain a subjective understanding, interpretivism emphasises that a researcher must study humans from how they perceive their own social realities (ibid: 2012: 28-32). Constructivism states that social actors are responsible for the emergence of phenomena (ibid: 2012: 33). The aim of research is not to reveal a definite truth, but instead to enlarge concepts (Moses and Knutsen 2007: 11-12). In this case, the author believes that the social realities of the students he studied are imperative settings from which to acquire knowledge that later is analysed and theoretically conceptualised. Since there exist several different truths to discover, this research wishes to provide one version, based on the opinions and perceptions of thirteen university students.

4.2. Qualitative research

Qualitative research methods, actualised as interviews and participant observation in the design of a case study, have been employed to gather data about food safety risk perceptions and food consumption behaviour. The reason why such an approach was chosen is because it might generate rich sources of information and enable the researcher to better comprehend motivational factors behind why consumers purchase or consume specific goods or foodstuffs (Noel 2009: 25) (see chapter 2.4.1. for the explanation of ‘motivation’).

4.2.1. Case study design

Case studies are applicable when the purpose is to improve the knowledge of a complex social phenomenon. This strategy enables the researcher to discover distinctive behaviours, changes and processes (Yin 2009: 4). The research of this thesis is conducted through an instrumental case study. The case, consisting of a group of undergraduate students at Peking University is scrutinised to understand a certain issue, namely food safety risk perceptions in relation to food consumption behaviour (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 437).

Peking University was selected as location for the study, because the author conducted fieldwork there during almost two months. Nevertheless, the decision was motivated by two significant reasons. Firstly, the identified difficulties to find Chinese interviewees made it crucial to set boundaries for the scope of the study. Secondly, the author had already from the beginning a desire to learn more about the eating habits of young Chinese urban middle class individuals and what attention they paid to food safety. Thus, an academic context was seen as ideal to access these kinds of social networks.

Though noteworthy mentioning is that students from Peking University must be distinguished from other individuals in the same age groups. Since this university is China’s most prestigious institution for higher learning, a large number of talented and ambitious minds are gathered here. These young adults receive the best possible education and are prepared for careers within all spheres of society. With potentially high spending power and influential career lives, their demands, perceptions and needs could have a considerable impact on the future development of China. In addition, as these students often come from well-to-do urban middle class families, they have been brought up in environments offering far better financial circumstances and opportunities than many other adolescents. Therefore,

their opinions and perceptions, influenced by favourable social backgrounds and educational advantages, might not be described as a genuine representation of society.

Within the case, the selected sample group consisted of thirteen male and female students at the age-range between 19 and 22 years. Nine of the students were following a multidisciplinary bachelor program in politics, philosophy and economics and four students were majoring in government management, political theory or public administration. The author believed that students from these fields of study were interested in societal affairs, conscious about food safety and also more willing to voice their thoughts and criticisms.

4.3. Data collection

Primary sources were collected during approximately two months of fieldwork at Peking University. With their consent, thirteen students participated in semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the author went once a week to any of the five most popular campus canteens to conduct passive participant observation. The intention was to discern whether students talked about food safety risks and also what kind of food they consumed there. Secondary sources comprised of books, research publications and newspaper articles that dealt with food consumption trends, food safety, risk perception, government policies, consumer behaviour and risk society theory.

4.3.1. Interviews

As the main method to collect qualitative data, interviews were utilised. The ambition was to recognise “the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 1). In addition, interviews consist of an indispensable source of evidence in case studies since they frequently deal with human events and behaviour. Interviewees that possess substantial amounts of information could thus be able to contribute with valuable insights (Yin 2009: 107-108).

With the help from the responsible fieldwork supervisor at Peking University, Associate Professor at the School of Government, Zhu Tianbiao, the author was given contact details to eight students willing to participate in interviews. In order to come in contact with more interviewees, snowball sampling technique was applied. After having finished an interview, each participant was subsequently asked to tell their acquaintances that the author was interested to reach other interviewees (Bryman 2012: 202). This method proved to be successful and interviews with five additional students were completed.

In total, thirteen students participated in interviews that each lasted between 40-60 minutes. The discussions were held in English, but if the interviewees had any difficulties grasping the questions, they were provided a written translation in Chinese. In case they could not find the correct words to express a specific sentiment, they were allowed to say or write down the equivalents in Chinese. As the level of English was relatively high among the students, there were only a few occasions of comprehension difficulties. The discussions concentrated on 27 questions about four different topics: food safety perception, the media and food scandals, food safety attitudes and awareness, food purchasing and consumption behaviour as well as food safety, quality and health risks. With regards to the interviewees, the author did not pay any particular attention to gender-specific differences in risk perceptions and food consumption behaviour. However, for future research it would perhaps be interesting to approach the topic from that angle.

4.3.2. Participant observation

Participant observation was chosen as the second approach to obtain qualitative data. In this method, the researcher becomes immersed in the activities and interactions of a specific social group to learn more about their explicit and implicit daily practises (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011: 1). More specifically, this study has applied a passive level of participation because the author was present at the scene where events took place, but only observed them from the perspective of a bystander (ibid: 2011: 23).

Scattered around the campus area of Peking University, ten canteens, three cafés, a SUBWAY sandwich-bar, two convenience stores, five fruit vendors and a handful of small restaurants and permanent food stalls cater for the food consumption needs of the students. Yet, the majority of all eating-places comprise of canteens, subsidized by the government, which provide a wide selection of cheap and safe food alternatives for breakfast, lunch and dinner. These are named: Nong Yuan, Xue Yi, Gui Lin, Song Ling, Yi Yuan, Xue Wu, Campus, Jia Yuan, Yan Nan and Tong Yuan, and are generally open from 07:00 to either 19:00 or 22:00 (see appendix 2 for a detailed campus canteen map). Outside of campus there is a restaurant for student and university purposes, Chang Chun Yuan, portable food stalls that set up shop in the evening and also a whole street lined with various outlets offering domestic regional cuisine, a KFC, a McDonald's, a Dairy Queen ice cream parlour, a bakery and a café.

During the whole fieldwork research period, the author regularly consumed food and beverages both on and outside of campus. Due to their good reputation, the five most visited canteens were Nong Yuan, Yan Nan, Song Ling, Campus and Yi Yuan. While spending time there, the intent was to passively observe food consumption behaviour and also to listen whether students discussed anything about food safety risks. Thus, relevant notes and reflections were written down and later compared with the interview results.

4.4. Validity and reliability

Validity indicates whether the generated scientific findings could be generalised to a wider social context (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 31). Reliability implies to what extent it is possible to achieve comparable results if a previous study would be simulated (ibid: 1982: 35). Though it would be intrinsically difficult to ensure validity only by making generalisations about empirical material attained from thirteen interviews and participant observation. Therefore, apart from interview and observation findings, this thesis draws strengths from both risk society theory and scientific research to claim its accuracy. To guarantee reliability, substantial attention was given to select already established qualitative data collection methods and research designs. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted and accounted for in great detail, which provides both transparency and trustworthiness to the research results.

4.5. Reflexivity of the researcher

The author is well aware that his social, cultural and educational background might have affected how the empirical data were interpreted. Regarding the interviews with the Chinese bachelor students, the author's status as a white male master student from Sweden could also have had an impact on what specific opinions and reflections the male and female interviewees decided to provide during the discussions. As these students were asked by their responsible professor to be interviewed, their participation and answers were perhaps influenced by their sense of obligation, respect for authority and the prospect of receiving higher grades. Additionally, the fact that the discussions were held in English, with only occasional translations into Chinese, could have forced the respondents to answer slightly different due to the barrier of not being able to speak a language that they entirely mastered.

4.6. Generalisation

Yin deems that the dilemma of not being able to make generalisations due to a lack of enough scientific knowledge can be avoided by expanding the findings with a theory instead of relying on the sample of a population (2009: 15). The empirical material in this explorative case study is not used to make generalisations, but functions as a tool for contextualisation with the help from the framework of Ulrich Beck's risk society theory. In fact, the theoretical concepts were crucial to obtain a better knowledge of why risks in society are perceived and handled in a certain manner. When related to the empirical data, they were valuable to verify and explain specific perceptions and behaviour of the university students.

4.7. Ethical considerations

In terms of ethical considerations, the author devoted considerable attention to both informed consent and confidentiality (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 71). Prior to participating in the interviews, all respondents were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study and had to give their oral consensus. Since the finished thesis was to be distributed in several copies and possibly also published on the internet, all interviewees were told that their answers would not be misused and that their identities should remain anonymous at all times. In the participant observations, the author listened to conversations of random students and studied their food consumption behaviour without tape-recording their voices.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter initiates with a brief description of the male and female interviewees and is followed by a presentation of the empirical data. Moreover, the intent is to conceptualise the findings with risk society theory as the backbone.

5.1. Demographics of interviewees

The interviewees consisted altogether of three men and ten women, in the age-range between 19 and 22, all pursuing undergraduate studies at Peking University. Nine of them followed a multidisciplinary bachelor program in politics, philosophy and economics, while the other four had their major in political theory, government management or public administration. Within the group, eleven out of thirteen interviewees were born and raised in different regions of the country, such as urban Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Anhui. However, one male and one female had their birthplace in Korea, but came to live in China several years ago. Due to their respective studies, everyone but one of the interviewees had resided in Beijing for the last one to three years. The exception was a female who had moved to the capital with her whole family nine years ago. In terms of family background, the parents of the interviewees were leading career lives as businessmen, accountants, legal advisors, engineers, military officials, teachers, university professors, civil servants, government officials within food safety supervision or environmental protection as well as medical doctors.

5.2. Food safety risk perceptions

All thirteen interviewees agreed that the high levels of air pollution in Beijing comprised the current most acute health concern to them. On the other hand, food safety was believed to be the second greatest threat towards their personal wellbeing. As a female conveyed: *“It’s not that food safety isn’t important, it’s just that the problems with air pollution in Beijing are huge now. Because of this, food safety seems to have become somewhat overlooked lately.”* (Student 9)

According to Beck, the globalisation of industrial production is responsible for creating a substantial variety of surrounding dangers that are unspecific in nature. As a result of this development, every aspect of reality might be perceived to transform into a threat and therefore nothing seems hazardous anymore. Thus, when people realise that there is no prospect of avoiding the problems, they tend to be less willing to take them into account. Ultimately, notions of risks in society move back and forth between anxiety and insignificance (1992: 36-37). By judging from the following reflections of three interviewees, Beck's argument of ignoring risks when they are becoming overwhelming can hence be affirmed:

"I'm aware of the huge problems with food safety and air pollution in China. I'm not cynical, but things have to be accepted. I've lived in Beijing for the last nine years and only recently bought myself an air-pollution mask. Of course, I'm worried about food safety, but you cannot live your life thinking about it all the time. You also need to enjoy life." (Student 5)

"The Chinese people are so used to hear and read about food safety incidents that we no longer want to care that much about health risks. All the information gets too much. It's becoming too common. It just makes you not want to bother anymore." (Student 3)

"Almost every day you find a new food incident in the media. There's too much information. Sometimes you feel numb and don't want to care. What other choices do you have?" (Student 9)

Beck emphasises that the process of accumulating wealth in advanced modernity is at the same time followed by the manufacturing of new social risks. Respectively, the struggles and difficulties that occur when wealth is distributed in a society with scarce resources intersect with the conflicts that emerge from the production of risks created by science and technology (1992: 19). His suggestion that hazards of today principally originate from scientific and technological development could not be entirely supported in the discussions. With regards to why they thought food safety risks occurred in China, the interviewees all pointed on two causal factors. On the one hand, they believed that immoral food producers added illegal chemicals or fake ingredients as an enticement to earn more money. On the

other hand, they stressed that the food safety supervision of the government was not sufficient. Instead, the perceptions of the informants adhered more towards the arguments of Zhou and Jin. In their elaborate investigation of the main flaws in the Chinese food supply chain, they also argue that careless profit-oriented food producers and malfunctioning governmental food safety management are two major sources of blame (2013: 16-17).

On the contrary, student 11 was of the opinion that poor hygiene posed a huge threat towards food safety today. He explained: *“The hygiene levels during food production in China is often very low. I think it’s an important reason why food poisoning incidents happen so often.”* Interestingly, this answer also stands in sharp contrast to Beck’s idea that dangers in pre-modern times originated from insufficient technology to assure hygiene, while they now instead have their roots in industrial mass-production (Beck 1992: 21). In its place, the opinion better corresponds to Zhou and Jin’s idea that poor hygiene in food production settings poses a huge threat towards food safety today, as it leads to dangerous microbiological contaminations (2013: 16-17).

The answers varied as to why the government was not able to solve the problems. Three interviewees argued that institutions that effectively implement and supervise food safety laws and regulations in China had not been built up yet. Two interviewees thought that the huge number of domestic food producers operating without a licence was very difficult to control. Eight interviewees explained that major liabilities were that the food safety management of the government was too slow, not powerful enough and that the standards to ensure food safety were exceedingly low. As a contradiction, only three of them admitted that they had knowledge about the current food safety laws and regulations.

The interviewees generally agreed that the food safety situation in China was urgent and at the same time very hard to solve. Beck maintains that technology can only help to diminish risks, not to entirely resolve them (1995: 1). One of them offered a similar thought:

“I believe that food can never be completely safe, because incidents will continue to appear also in the future. The reason is that when the government implements new food safety and quality standards, the producers always find new ways to escape them.” (Student 7)

Though in response to how these issues should be dealt with, technological solutions were never mentioned. In its place, six interviewees answered that the fines for not abiding the laws were too low in comparison to what food producers could earn by replacing raw materials with harmful ingredients. Hence, the government had to be stricter in its enforcement and punish such illegal acts much harder. Seven interviewees indicated that it was crucial for the government agencies to provide more information, as people today were not taking the problem seriously or having an adequate knowledge of food safety. In addition, it was believed to be important for the government to establish better relationships with the food producers, as a measure to make them behave more responsible.

5.3. Media impact and food safety risk awareness

Among the interviewees, internet was used as the main tool to access information about food safety risks. The most frequently visited websites were Weibo, Weixin and Renren. For seven of them, television included the second most important media channel, particularly news programs from the national television-broadcasting network, CCTV. Other than the media, four interviewees explained that friends and family informed them at times.

In terms of hazards that are difficult to recognise with the senses, Beck is of the opinion that the media is able to make them visible through reports, something that otherwise would have been impossible for citizens to comprehend in daily life (1995: 100). Regarding food safety incidents that the interviewees had read about, everyone mentioned the nationwide San Lu melamine milk powder scandal that was unravelled in 2008. In addition, five remembered a case from 2012, where food suppliers to KFC restaurants fed their chickens with toxic chemicals. Four interviewees stated the on-going problems with restaurants that were using harmful recyclable cooking oil. One of them also indicated the event in 2011, where pigs had been fed the toxic chemical clenobuterol to make their meat leaner.

Beck states that the knowledge about risks starts from being either scientific or non-scientific. However, they can be altered, sensationalised, expanded or minimized until they are available for social explanation and construction. The media institutions and scientific experts responsible to define risks are therefore crucial agents (1992: 23). He further continues by disputing that particularly the media provide several opportunities to influence the public's understanding of social issues (ibid: 1992: 197). The important role of the media

to make people more aware of food safety threats can be discerned in this answer:

“Until the 2008 San Lu milk scandal was reported in the media, I don’t think anyone really thought about food safety risks. Now that we know, it’s unacceptable that producers are allowed to add dangerous chemical substances in food just because they want to earn more money.” (Student 2)

All of the thirteen interviewees argued that food safety was an urgent social issue, but only seven of them were interested to read specific news about it. Their anxiety can be summarised in these sentiments: *“I think it’s important to learn more about food safety. I want to know what milk brand I shouldn’t drink. I want to know what food is safe or not to eat”* (Student 4) and also:

“Food safety is very important. Today, in China, there’s always a risk of eating food that contains dangerous substances. I feel worried because young children could fall ill or die. I’m also afraid to eat food that could affect my own physical wellbeing.” (Student 2)

Beck critically announces that the discussions about air pollution and food poisonings today generally focus on scientific formulations. Thus, when people seek information about these problems, they are presented with public alarms. When they have to draw their own conclusions, the whole scenario confuses them. In public discussions, they are either considered as equally affected by this situation regardless of their salaries, education level and food choices or they are neglected in favour of assessments of effects from toxic chemicals. What should be taken into account is that these contaminants could bring varying interpretations to different people, depending on their age, food consumption and educational merits (1992: 24-26). As a consequence, the debates about risks display obvious gaps between scientific and social logic (ibid: 1992: 30). To confirm Beck’s argument, criticism towards the government and media for not revealing adequate information could be distinguished in these two answers:

“The information about food safety needs to be more transparent so that consumers get a better understanding of possible health risks. Food is something that we cannot live without. We need to eat every day and it should not be allowed to contain harmful substances. All the added hormones in food are dangerous to our health.”
(Student 12)

“People today are not really aware of health risks when they consume food. Chinese food is unfortunately not safe enough. The problem is that we, as consumers, cannot recognise what food is safe or not. But, still, we must eat. Then, we cannot avoid the risks. The government must provide the right information and punish immoral food producers much harder.” (Student 9)

These attitudes are also similar to Ni and Zeng’s discussion that the overall transparency regarding food safety issues in China must increase. As food producers rarely are interested to inform consumers, they contend that the government has an important role to play, both to force the food industry to offer more information and to strengthen consumer awareness (2009: 1990).

5.4. Food consumption, risks, safety and health aspects

Twelve out of thirteen interviewees resided in dormitories and therefore lacked any facilities to cook their own food. One female who lived in a shared flat prepared and ate almost all her meals at home. The others went every day to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in ten different canteens located on campus. Due to its widespread popularity, the most visited canteens were Nong Yuan because of its large variety of dishes, Yan Nan for its higher price and better quality, Song Ling for its tasty breakfast menu, Campus for its mix of both Western and Chinese cuisine and also Yi Yuan for its many vegetable based dishes (see appendix 2 for a detailed campus canteen map). With regards to the food consumed there, the interviewees were generally not worried about health afflictions. As student 5 explained: *“The food served in the canteens is cheap and safe. The government priorities students from Peking University and wouldn’t want to risk any bad publicity if a food safety incident occurred here.”* Intriguingly, as students from China’s most prestigious university, their personal safety was guaranteed through governmental subsidizes.

Even though the interviewees consumed the majority of their meals in canteens, it was also common among them to dine with friends in restaurants outside of the university premises. During such occasions, they were aware of their exposure to food safety risks. The reactions of where it was possible to come in contact with the biggest threats all concentrated on: *“The places where you mainly will find unsafe food are in unknown small restaurants or from street food vendors.”* (Student 8) The principles guiding the choice of restaurant mostly focused on that the food had to be *“tasty”* and *“not containing too much oil or fat”*, but also that *“the interior needs to be clean and hygienic”*. Problematically, the interviewees generally agreed that it was difficult to know what levels of sanitation restaurants maintained since they often kept their kitchens separated. However, student 7 had invented a rule of thumb to come to terms with the dilemma: *“Before ordering food in a restaurant, I go to check their bathroom. If it feels clean and tidy, the kitchen should also be hygienic.”*

In addition, all interviewees frequently bought food products that they consumed at home. Five always bought domestic food products and six of them almost all the time, which meant that they complemented their ordinary domestic food purchases with a few imported alternatives. Student 3 did not care so much about the origin, but explained that: *“The process of buying imported food products demands so much more time and effort. I’m actually too lazy to care.”* Instead, student 1 who prepared her own meals preferred to buy imported food products, such as tomato sauce, spaghetti, bread and cheese. She articulated that: *“I’ve lived in many places abroad and during those years, I acquired a taste for international cuisine. Chinese producers cannot always offer the food products I want”*.

Beck proposes that some people are more vulnerable to risks than others. Especially wealth and social class belonging tend to determine whether one is more likely to be affected or not (1992: 23). Thus, whoever has the essential wealth can evade hazards by purchasing and consuming food products that are guaranteed to be safe. In addition, education makes it possible to access media channels to become informed and thereby evade insecurities (ibid: 1992: 35). Eleven out of thirteen interviewees believed that imported food products, particularly from the U.S. and Europe, were much safer than domestic equivalents. The main reasons were that they had heard or read in the media that these countries had stricter controls of food quality standards and a more developed food safety management system.

The fact that the interviewees had received knowledge about safer food alternatives from various social media channels on the internet, gives weight to Beck's claim that education can function as an important method to enlighten oneself about risks. However, when asked why they did not solely buy imported food products due to their allegedly high safety, the general answer was that they were extremely expensive. Therefore, stipulated that they had more money at their disposal in the future, they would like to start buying imported food products on a regular basis. Since many of the interviewees gave the impression of coming from relatively well-off families, their opinions that the prices for such products were too high, suggests that not everyone has the financial means to afford them in China. Despite this fact, two interviewees validate Beck's argument that wealth can offer the freedom to avoid food safety risks:

"I buy green and organic food products even if they are more expensive. I believe that they are natural and safer. They don't contain any artificial or dangerous substances. My friends always choose cheaper alternatives, but I never do. Price is an indicator of high quality, which I look for." (Student 13)

"It's difficult to find food that is completely safe in China. From the Internet, I therefore buy all my milk from Australia and sometimes also coffee from Malaysia or Singapore." (Student 7)

Health is a broad concept that involves several attributes. On the one hand, health for consumers can be explained by a desire to eat healthy food products and to avoid those that are rich in fat or unhealthy in other ways. Moreover, it encapsulates the unease for food safety risks (Brunsø et al. 2002: 21). Eleven of the interviewees were paying attention to their health when consuming food. When being asked what food was considered good for the health, the answers ranged from *"vegetables and fruits with a lot of vitamins and fibres"*, *"limited amounts of oil and meat"*, *"boiled and steamed meat and vegetables"*, *"home cooked meals"* and *"natural ingredients"* and *"no harmful additives"*. Regarding what food that was bad for the health, the responses varied between *"high amounts of sugar, salt and oil"* and *"a lot of fried food"*. With regards to fast food, four interviewees consumed it almost once a week, four less than once a month and five never. The most popular outlets were KFC and McDonald's, but Burger King and Pizza Hut were mentioned as well. Yet, everyone believed that fast food was unhealthy since you could get fat by eating it at too regular intervals.

5.5. Individual strategies to deal with food safety risks

Grunert describes that safety as a food-related aspect both covers an objective and a subjective part. Thus, objectivity deals with evaluation of risks of scientific experts, while subjectivity is in the point of views' of the consumers (2005: 381). Even though safety and quality of food are related it can also be suggested that perceived risks might take total control over the food purchasing decisions and guide consumers to evade specific brands until the crisis has returned to normal circumstances again (ibid: 2005: 381). The following behaviour can be discerned in the answer of student 12: *“In the beginning, when you hear about an incident and are advised not to eat that food, you care about it. But after a while, you go back to your old habits again.”*

In the viewpoint of Beck, modernity opens up several new spaces for the individualisation of risks. In fact, society demands that people make use of their own critical judgements since scientific experts solely leave them with inconsistent explanations (1992: 136-137). In dealing with individual food safety risks, three interviewees controlled quality standards and expiry dates on food products and avoided street food stalls and restaurants that were neither clean nor well known. Four of them checked the expiry date on food products, controlled the hygiene level before entering restaurants as well as consulting friends or the internet about safe alternatives. Six interviewees mentioned that they tried to ensure personal food safety by buying food products of brands with a good reputation and only selecting clean and bigger restaurants.

Concerning food products labelled with quality standards, three interviewees specifically looked for these kinds. Interestingly, six mentioned that they did not necessarily trust bigger domestic food brands or categories that were said to meet certain quality criteria. As student 9 declared: *“I don't really trust quality standards. There've been many cases in the past, where corrupt governmental officials approved food products even though they weren't fit for consumption.”* Interestingly, two interviewees explained that they did not have any knowledge about food quality standards, because they seemed too scientific and complicated to understand. As student 1 argued: *“I don't buy food with quality standards. I've lived the last two years without parents and I don't know how to look for them or which specific kinds that I should buy. I have to rely on myself and it's difficult.”* This answer resembles Beck's belief that modern society has dissolved previous family ties. Thus, the

individual can no longer depend on traditional support and relations, but has to rely on his or her own abilities when making choices (1992: 153).

When asked whether food choices had changed since moving to Beijing, five interviewees answered that the biggest difference was that their mothers earlier had prepared all their food, but now they had to eat in university canteens every day. Two answered that nothing really had changed since they always used to eat the same kind of foodstuffs. Three explained that they had started to lead a healthier lifestyle with less fast food and a more balanced diet. Three did not think that their eating habits had changed that much, apart from the fact that they now ate less spicy food.

From a cause and effect point of view, seven out of thirteen interviewees admitted, in varying degrees, that they had changed their eating habits as a result of recent food safety incidents. Nevertheless, when the empirical findings were thoroughly analysed and compared, four more interviewees could be added to that group. Interestingly, these individuals offered a negative answer on the specific question, but argued something completely different during other occasions. Perhaps, they had different connotations of what the concept of habitual food consumption patterns meant or that they were not really aware of their own behaviour. Therefore, one could argue that this supports the suggestion of Kotler et al. that consumer behaviour is a complex social phenomenon to study (2009: 243).

Considering the motivations for the deviations in food choices, student 11 revealed: *“I’ve stopped buying two brands of semi-prepared noodle dishes, because they were involved in scandals earlier.”* Instead, student 10 enunciated that: *“I avoid domestic dairy products and meat, because they often contain high amounts of hormones. They can cause cancer and are especially dangerous to women and children.”* Two interviewees believed that they had become much more concerned about hygiene when eating in restaurants. One of them said: *“If I sense that a restaurant is unclean when I enter, I now directly leave it.”* (Student 6) Student 5 mentioned that she had not changed her eating habits so much. Even so, she specified: *“Before I used to drink San Lu milk, but not anymore. I also avoid buying semi-prepared food from supermarkets. I’ve heard that they can be full of harmful additives.”* Moreover, student 9 claimed: *“Now I drink less milk and I only buy food products that are well known and have a good reputation.”* In total, five interviewees specifically argued that

they had changed dairy brand due to the San Lu melamine milk scandal in 2008. A male provided a thorough explanation:

“Before I used to buy milk without caring. I often drank milk from the company San Lu, but after the nationwide incident, I’ve now changed to the brand San Yuan instead. They produce fresh milk and haven’t been involved in any problems yet. I’ve also heard that government officials in Beijing prefer that brand. If they drink it, I think it’s safe enough for me to do it, too.” (Student 2)

He also said: *“I also avoid buying oranges and apples that look too shiny. In the past, there’ve been incidents, where fruits were treated with harmful chemicals so as to look nicer and more tasty.”* (Student 2)

Two interviewees emphasised that they had not changed their eating habits because of prior food poisoning scandals. Student 12 implied that she was not heavily influenced by food safety: *“I don’t feel so worried even if there are threats. I think that a few risks are ok but not all the time.”* Finally, the other interviewee offered quite an interesting answer:

“I’ve not directly experienced any food safety incidents yet and that’s why I don’t want to change my eating habits. I’m convinced that the problem with food safety soon will be solved, because the government works very hard on it. If I received serious health problems related to poisonous food, I think I would start buying different kinds. Of course, if I become mother some day, I’ll buy imported food products for the safety of my child.” (Student 3)

As Beck reasons, people who purely eat and drink without taking any further considerations of the underlying mechanisms behind impending hazards are both innocent and misinterpret the gravity of the situation (1992: 73).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter summarises the most distinguishing results of the study and also discusses the similarities and differences between the empirical data and the concepts of risk society theory. Finally, the thesis is rounded off with some final conclusions.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore food safety risk perceptions of students at Peking University and to what extent they influenced their food consumption behaviour. As to better understand this complex social phenomenon, the study mainly relied on findings obtained from thirteen interviews and participant observations in campus canteens. Since much of food safety involves risks and how to avoid them, Ulrich Beck's risk society theory was therefore applied to analyse and conceptualise the empirical findings.

The study found that the interviewees perceived food safety as a major health risk. The main channel with which to increase food safety awareness was through social media platforms on the internet and news programs on public television. Unfortunately, the state-owned media institutions were criticised for not providing enough information about how to adequately cope with food hazards. In fact, the interviewees sometimes gave the impression of lacking fundamental knowledge about this complex social issue. Their perceptions can consequently be sustained in Beck's notion that information about risks in the media often focuses on scientific explanations that are difficult for ordinary people to grasp.

The main concern was that the poorly regulated food safety supervision of the government allowed enterprises to add illegal substances or fake additives in food for profit-making incentives. Even though Beck suggests that risks principally originate from technology, his argument might not claim absolute validity here. Naturally, illegal chemicals or additives are scientifically produced, but people are responsible for placing them in food or feeding them to animals. In addition, the interviewees voiced that the current food safety situation was critical and in great demand of improvement. They argued that the large number of food safety incidents in recent years had made it almost impossible to know whether food was safe or not to eat. Accordingly, their major anxiety was if young children or themselves involuntarily experienced food poisonings that would result in potentially serious health affliction. The most mentioned case was the San Lu melamine milk scandal, where a few hundred thousand infants were seriously injured. Despite the fears, some interviewees

expressed ignorance towards the impending threats. Frequent news reports in the media about food safety issues and the supposedly increased likelihood of encountering problems had thus resulted in an unwillingness to properly acknowledge them. These sentiments correspond accurately to Beck's idea that modern society shifts back and forth between sensations of panic and irrelevance when the number of hazards is becoming overpowering.

The study also found that the food safety risk perceptions of the interviewees influenced their food consumption behaviour. In conformity with Beck's argument that risk society demands people to individually and critically deal with potential insecurities, the interviewees were applying different strategies. Generally, they controlled quality standards and expiry dates on food products, avoided questionable street food vendors, inspected the cleanliness and hygiene of restaurants, consulted friends and internet websites and also selected famous food brands and restaurants with a good reputation. Furthermore, eleven out of thirteen interviewees had, to varying degrees, changed their food consumption behaviour because of recent food adulteration incidents. Interestingly, even if not all of them openly admitted this, the empirical findings often told a different story when analysed. Thus, this shows the complexity of trying to understand consumer behaviour. In actual terms, most interviewees had stopped to drink milk from the dairy brand San Lu because of a nationwide scandal in 2008. Others mentioned that they now avoided buying semi-prepared food products since they often contained high amounts of harmful additives, but also fruits that had been polished with toxic chemicals.

Noteworthy mentioning is that imported food products, particularly from Europe and the U.S. were argued to be much safer than domestic equivalents. Bearing in mind the magnitude of the food safety problems in China, perhaps the interviewees would have changed their respective eating habits more if such products were not as expensive as they are today. In addition, this fact gives prominence to Beck's argument that wealth can be used as an effective measure to buy protection from risks.

In sum, Beck's risk society theory was useful in order to obtain a better awareness of risk-related perceptions and how they might influence food choices. Regrettably, the framework was not always possible to apply in the conceptualisation of the empirical findings. For example, during the interviews, trust and distrust were commonly discussed themes. Since Beck does not provide an ample explanation of the importance of these two

concepts, the author had to leave them out. On the other hand, the sociologist Anthony Giddens gives more room for social trust in his research about modernisation and risks. Perhaps for future research, his hypotheses could be used to effectively fill in the missing gaps of this study. Another consideration would be to focus more on gender-specific risk perceptions and food consumption behaviour. As thoughts and reflections often differ between men and women, it would thus be interesting to examine the topic from this angle.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guide

The following structure of topics has been selected for the interviews. Depending on the outcomes of the answers of the students, some questions were at times not dealt with or asked in a different order. Throughout the interviews, the author frequently asked follow-up questions to further expand the discussions and knowledge regarding specific aspects.

Basic information

Age

年龄

Male/female

男生/女生

Place of origin

籍贯

Parents' occupation

父母的工作

Field of study

专业

Time lived in Beijing

住在北京多久

Perception of food safety

1. Why do you think food safety incidents occur?

你觉得为什么食品安全事件发生？

2. What do you think the government can do to improve food safety in China?

你觉得政府怎么可能提高中国的食品安全？

The media and food safety scandals

3. From where do you receive information about food safety scandals?

你从哪儿得到食评安全事件消息？

4. Can you name any of the food safety scandals you have read or heard about?

比如说你看过或者听过什么样的食品安全事件？

5. Are you interested to read about these incidents? Why?

你对看食品安全事件消息有兴趣吗？为什么？

Food safety attitudes and awareness

6. Which are your biggest health concerns?

你觉得什么是你最大的健康有关？

7. What do you think about when you hear the term food safety?

食品安全对你来说是什么意思？

8. Do you think food safety is important?

你觉得食品安全重要吗？

9. What do you think are the biggest food safety problems in China?

你觉得中国今天最严重的食品安全问题是什么？

Food purchasing and consumption behaviour

10. How many meals do you eat every day?

你每天吃多少餐点？

11. Where do you eat your daily meals? Home? Restaurants? University canteens? Other?

你在哪儿吃饭？在家？在餐厅？在食堂？在别的地方？

12. Do you eat in fast food restaurants?

你在快餐店吃饭吗？

13. Do you buy snacks or other food products that you can eat at home?

你买零食还是食品在家吃吗？

14. Do you buy domestic food products or imported food products?

你买国内食品还是洋货食品吗？

15. How much do you spend on food every month?

你每个月花多少钱吃饭？

Food consumption, safety, quality and health aspects

16. How do you decide what restaurants you go to or what food products you buy? What is most important to you?

你怎么决定什么餐厅好还是什么食品好？对你来说，什么特点是最重要的？

17. Do you think about health when you consume food? What food do you think is bad for your health? What food is good?

你吃饭的时候会考虑到健康的方面吗？你认为什么食品对身体健康好／不好？

18. Do you believe to have a healthy lifestyle?

你认为你有一个健康的生活方式吗？

19. What do you think is food of high quality?

你觉得高品质的食品是什么？

20. Do you think about food safety when you eat in restaurants or buy food products?

在餐厅吃饭的时候还是买食品的时候，你会想到食品安全吗？

21. Are there food products or restaurants you find trustworthy? Untrustworthy?

你觉得有没有信实的食品或者餐厅？不信实的？

22. How do you think it is possible to find food that is safe?

你觉得怎么可能找到安全的食品？

23. Do think that imported food products are safer?

你觉得洋货食品更安全吗？

24. Would you buy more imported food products if you had more money at your disposal?

如果有钱，你想买更多洋货的食品吗？

25. Have your food consumption patterns changed since you moved to Beijing?

从你搬到北京之后有没有改变过你吃饭的方式？

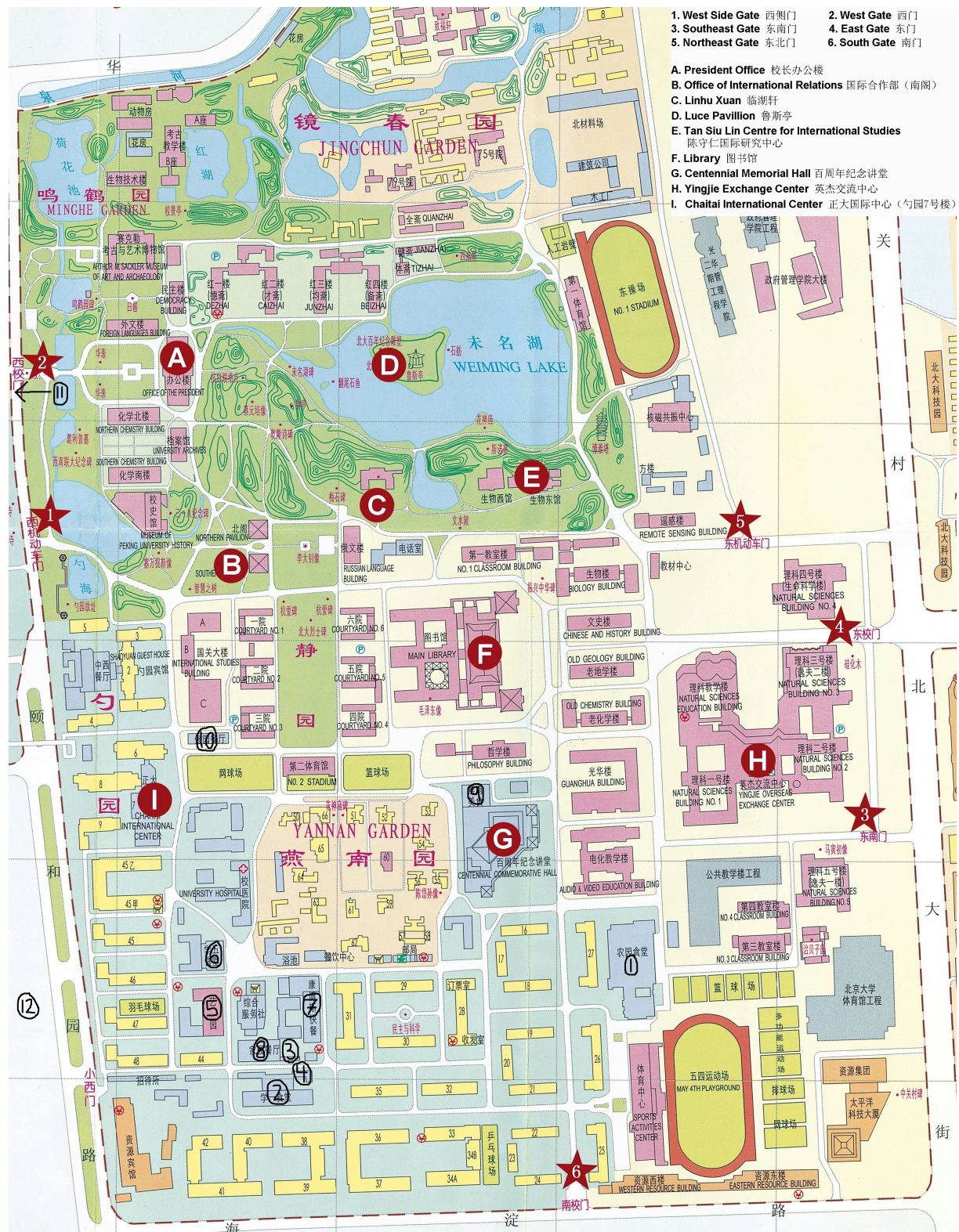
26. Have your food consumption patterns changed because of food scandals?

食品安全问题有没有改变过你吃饭的方式？

27. Would you like to change your eating habits?

你想改变你吃饭的方式吗？

Appendix 2 – Campus/canteen map of Peking University



- | | | |
|--------------|-------------|---|
| 1. Nong Yuan | 5. Yi Yuan | 9. Yan Nan |
| 2. Xue Yi | 6. Xue Wu | 10. Tong Yuan |
| 3. Gui Lin | 7. Campus | 11. Chang Chun Yuan (outside of campus) |
| 4. Song Ling | 8. Jia Yuan | 12. Food street (outside of campus) |