

## Of Mad Cows and Dead Pigs: Negotiating Food Safety and Everyday Sovereignty in Taiwan

### Abstract

*The globalization of food and agricultural trade has brought issues of food safety and biosecurity to the centre of geopolitical research. This paper explores the relationship between food risks and sovereignty practices, a topic that has received relatively scant attention in the scholarship. Going beyond conventional conceptualizations of sovereignty as an external-legal notion that is delimited to the realm of 'high politics' in international relations, this paper points to how it is also expressed and negotiated in quotidian practices of food import and consumption, and how this has contributed to the politicization of food safety. Focusing on the case of Taiwan, a de facto island state with contested sovereignty status, and comparing the food safety discourses that arose during the outbreaks of Mad Cow Disease and African Swine Fever, we argue that food risks provide opportunities for social and political actors to participate in the construction of sovereignty. While the Taiwanese government's handling of the Mad Cow Disease shows it to be ultimately constrained by the geopolitical reality of fragile sovereignty, the outbreak of African Swine Fever enabled it to legitimize the securitization of borders and bolster its legitimacy by staging collective defensive actions against perceived external risks. By drawing attention to how sovereignty is produced and performed through practice, this paper further advances recent discussions of sovereignty as a dynamic, social process.*

Keywords: Food safety, biosecurity, sovereignty, disease, borders, Taiwan

### Introduction

The globalization of food and agricultural trade has brought issues of food safety and biosecurity to the centre of geopolitical research (Ingram 2005; 2009). As our diets become increasingly connected through integrated networks of food production and consumption, the outbreak of infectious diseases has also become more common and widespread. The hoof-and-mouth disease in livestock, the avian influenza, and the recent African Swine Fever – to name but a few examples – have all but highlighted the threats and devastation caused by the global circulation of infectious agents through trade networks. For many governments and transnational institutions, food as a transmitter of infectious diseases presents a critical source of risks, raising difficult questions about border governance and the regulation of movement both within and between nations (Higgins and Dibden 2011). Such risks have also necessitated the adoption of biosecurity measures, which aim to protect economies, ecosystems and social infrastructures from the threats and damages caused by pests and pathogens (Heikkilä 2010).

In existing studies, scholars have explored how the global nature of diseases places national governments in a dilemma between commitments to trade liberalization and the effective implementation of biosecurity governance (Higgins and Dibden 2011; Maye et al. 2012; O'Neill and Fagan 2006). In the past decades, the advancement of free trade agendas championed by international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) has contributed to the gradual dismantlement of trade barriers. The prerogative to safeguard health, however, has countered neoliberal priorities of international trade and highlighted the need for biosecurity measures to protect populations and ecosystems against invasive pests and viruses. This is exemplified by governments' adoption of policies such as quarantine, inspection, isolation, segregation, and surveillance (Barker 2008; Bingham et al. 2008; Heikkilä 2010; Hinchliffe and Bingham 2008). These measures have been described by some as 'a highly spatialized form of control' aimed at 'the maintenance of static territorial integrity' (Donaldson and Wood 2004, 373, 386). As O'Neill and Fagan (2006, 212) put it, national governments are now forced to reconcile two contending prerogatives, namely the commitment to trade liberalization on the hand and 'the domestic need to retain sovereignty over protection of national borders' on the other.

However, the counterposition of trade liberalization to sovereignty – associating the one with openness and movement and the other with closure and territoriality – overlooks the dynamic and contested processes that often underpin the governance of food and biosecurity risks. Rather than treating the two as oppositional policy objectives, this paper explores how the governance of food safety in the context of international trade constitutes a crucial arena for the everyday negotiation and construction of sovereignty. Going beyond conventional conceptualizations of sovereignty as an external-legal notion that is delimited to the realm of 'high politics' in international relations, this paper points to how it is also expressed and negotiated in quotidian practices of food import and consumption, and how this has contributed to the politicization of food safety not just as a trade issue but also as a sovereignty issue. As Maye et al. (2012, 151) pointed out, there has been little scrutiny of 'the ways in which constructions of biological threat may reinforce state sovereignty concerning biosecurity practices.' By drawing attention to how sovereignty is produced and performed in the everyday, this paper further advances recent discussions of sovereignty as a dynamic, social process (Beurskens and Miggelbrink 2017; de Carvalho et al. 2019; Kessler and Guillaume 2012).

We reveal these dynamics through a case study of Taiwan, specifically the way the island state has reacted to the outbreaks of Mad Cow Disease (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, hereafter BSE) and African Swine Fever (hereafter ASF), which respectively affected the import of beef products from America and the entry of pork products from China. As an island state that often finds itself at the centre of geopolitical rivalry between the two powers, Taiwan presents a unique case for re-visiting canonical notions of sovereignty. Krasner conjectures that Taiwan illustrates the ‘plasticity of sovereignty’ where there are inconsistencies between academic conceptualization and the de facto practices of sovereignty (Krasner 2011, xv- xvii). The People’s Republic of China (PRC) government has long seen Taiwan as no more than a renegade province, and its ‘One China’ principle has conditioned international recognition of Taiwan’s sovereign status and its participation in global institutions such as the WTO (Chen 2017). Between 2001 and 2019, some 16 countries have severed ties with Taiwan in exchange for maintaining trade relations with China. On the US side, the American government has continued its non-diplomatic economic and military exchanges with Taiwan under the 1979 Taiwan Relation Act and the recent Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. Washington provides military assistance to Taiwan as a means of containing China’s regional expansion and preventing conflicts in the Taiwan Strait (Chase 2005). The centrality of trade ties with China to American interests meant that the US has nevertheless remained reticent about Taiwan’s assertion of sovereign status (Bellocchi 2007), at least prior to the recent escalation in US-China tensions. The ambiguous postures of America and the wider international community hence leave Taiwan in a quagmire of fragile international status.

While extant studies have analysed Taiwan’s contested sovereignty from the external-legal perspective, this paper takes food safety and biosecurity governance as an entry point to reveal the nuanced construction of sovereignty. Here, we conceptualize sovereignty as operating on the state level that encompasses multiple population groups, rather than in a narrower sense as the sovereignty of the native people, which is sometimes used in studying places with a significant indigenous population (D’Arcus 2003). Based on this perspective, our paper makes two main observations. First, we argue that food and biosecurity act as an important platform for observing how sovereignty is constructed and performed through representations and practices. Discourses on food evoke narratives of safety, security and public health, which are directly tied to the regulation of national boundaries. In Taiwan’s case, the outbreak of food-related diseases has given rise to narratives of risk and danger concerning the import of beef from the US and the illegal entry

of tainted pork from China. These narratives, which were translated into concrete policies, constitute instances where sovereignty is negotiated and enacted under the geopolitical reality of American and Chinese hegemony in food trade. Drawing on both field interviews and media analysis, our case studies show how sovereignty is socially co-constructed through the interplay of actors ranging from politicians, government agencies, media outlets, experts and citizens in Taiwan.

Furthermore, by comparing Taiwanese reactions to tainted meat products originating from the US and China, this paper highlights the distinctive nuances in discursive representation when confronted with different geopolitical powers and interests. While critics of American beef imports accused the government of cowardice and political submissiveness to foreign pressure, opposition to the illicit entry of Chinese pork into Taiwan is framed in much more securitized language and presented as a direct threat to sovereignty that could compromise Taiwan's national security. The difference in response to what is perceived to be unsafe meat products in both instances reveals how relations with the US and China are viewed differently in Taiwan, and how the island state is differentially constrained in its geopolitical and economic ties to the two powers.

The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. It begins with a review of the literature on food safety, biosecurity and sovereignty, followed by a description of research method and data. The paper then compares and contrasts Taiwanese reactions to tainted beef products from the US and pork products from China in the wake of disease outbreaks. The concluding section discusses the insights gained from using food as an angle to analyse geopolitics and the everyday construction of sovereignty.

### **Food safety, biosecurity, and sovereignty**

As a crucial component of life and livelihoods, the importance of food extends well beyond the individual realm of personal well-being and is fundamental to public health and national survival. This paper examines the relationship between food safety and sovereignty by drawing attention to how sovereignty is constructed and enacted via everyday practice. In doing so, it brings together critical scholarship on sovereignty, securitization, and border studies to examine the geopolitics of food safety and biosecurity.

Traditional conceptualizations of sovereignty usually consist of three main tenets, including the equal footings of sovereign states in the international arena, the territorial preservation of existing boundaries, and the recognition of internal jurisdiction by a legitimate government (Elden 2007; Krasner 2010; Ruggie 1983). These conventional definitions have recently been challenged for overlooking the dynamic, processual nature of the quotidian construction of sovereignty (Dunn 2001; Olson 2016). Instead of being a given state of affair or a precondition for politics to act, sovereignty is routinely shaped and reshaped, constructed and reconstructed by both state and non-state actors (Biersteker and Weber 1996). According to de Carvalho et al. (2019, 186), sovereignty stems from the social process of (re)production among different actors, including ‘the more quotidian, mundane or humdrum practices of actors not generally seen as central to the “high politics”’ of international relations. The literature challenges idealized narratives of international politics as ‘the realm of exceptional events conducted by states and statesmen’ (Guillaume 2011, 459), and calls for a focus on the ‘everyday’ to show ‘the extent to which key international practices, concepts and representations rely on their routine enactments in everyday settings’ (de Carvalho et al. 2019, 186).

This paper argues that the geopolitics of food safety and biosecurity provides unique insights into the intersection of everyday sovereignty and global structures, particularly with regard to the production and governance of risks and boundaries. To begin with, the production, assessment and management of risks is a key theme in security studies, including biosecurity (Higgins and Dibden 2011). Recent discussions of securitization, particularly by the Copenhagen school, have challenged conventional understandings of security and pointed out how the very meaning of national security hinges on how social actors (re)present ‘national existential threats’ (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization involves the construction of an intersubjective understanding within a political community that legitimates something as a threat that requires urgent and exceptional responsive measures (Buzan and Wæver 2003; Stritzel 2007). The construction of risks and security thus involves a broad spectrum of actors from different political and social spheres (Watson, 2012).

In the literature on food safety, scholars have similarly drawn attention to the nature of food risks as social constructs. Using the BSE incident in the United Kingdom as an example, Lien (2004) notes that food has become a matter in the international arena that is associated with risks and issues of distrust, particularly during the outbreak of food-related epidemics. Perceptions of

risks can be produced and circulated through the technologies and routine of media representation (Denney 2005). Focusing on the incident of Chinese gyoza food poisoning in Japan, Rosenberger (2009, 237) demonstrates how the media amplifies risk perceptions where ‘global food becomes a key metaphor for threats to national borders’. These constructions of risks intersect with elite narratives where framings of risks can be used by political actors to advance certain policy agendas (Essex and Le Billon 2014; Higgins and Dibden 2011; Qian and Le Billon 2014; Sommerville et al. 2014). In our case study of BSE and ASF, we demonstrate how the construction of meat imports as risks has legitimized the securitization of borders as a defensive measure against external threats.

A related theme in biosecurity research concerns how boundaries are produced, governed and contested. The plethora of food risk discourses forces political entities to adjust the permeability of their territorial boundaries to regulate the import of foreign food products. Because sovereignty is ‘fundamentally related to controlling and filtering of movements’ (Beurskens and Miggelbrink 2017, 753), a key intersection of food safety, biosecurity and sovereignty lies at the geopolitics of borders and boundary-making (Barker 2008; Smart and Smart 2011). The recent scholarship on boundary studies has proposed reconceptualizing boundaries as a dynamic process. Rather than treating them as rigid, static lines, national borders are ‘constantly negotiated and reconfigured’ by actors (Laine 2016, 467). Scholars have further called for the ‘vernacularization’ of borders, which directs attention to how social actors participate in boundary-drawing in an everyday setting (Jones and Johnson 2014). Borders are not just physical and territorial but also symbolic, with the act of categorization being a bordering force (Jones 2009). Taiwan, whose external legal status as a sovereign state has been disputed, offers a pertinent case to illustrate the dynamic process in which national boundaries are contested.

These perspectives can be fruitfully applied in the geopolitical study of food and biosecurity. In essence, geopolitics can be described as discourses and practices that are engaged in ‘the creation of geographical relationships and orders so that global space becomes divided into simplistic categories such as good/evil, threatening/safe and civilised/barbaric’ (Dittmer and Dodd 2008, 441). The globalization of food risks is deconstructing borders while creating new ones through categorization, often by pitting ‘safe’ and ‘local’ against ‘foreign’ and ‘risky’. As Mather and Marshall (2010, 10) argued, ‘the emerging geopolitics of biosecurity is leading to “re-territorialization of space” – not neatly along national boundaries but, instead, characterized by a more complex and global patchwork of secure and “unruly” space’. The literature on food

nationalism and localism has long observed how food is closely tied to identity. Employing the notion of ‘everyday nationhood’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), Ichijo and Ranta (2016, 22-23) examine quotidian food practices as a means to observe ‘how ordinary people make sense of and enact nationalism, nationhood and national belonging in their everyday life’. This can involve boundary work, as seen in Hung and Lien’s study of Vietnam-Taiwan tea trade (2019), where Vietnamese tea imports are categorized as inferior and unsafe in the context of local food movements and nationalism in Taiwan. Hung and Lien’s insights can be further extended to foodborne infectious diseases. As we show in the case study of BSE and ASF in Taiwan, such quotidian, boundary-drawing practices were at work in framing US beef and Chinese pork as unsafe and risky food products that threatened the island state’s fragile sovereignty – particularly in the latter case.

Bringing together the above scholarship to study the geopolitics of food and biosecurity, this paper offers insights into how sovereignty is negotiated and constructed through discourses of risks and national security and through the contested politics of bordering. It also sheds light on the interplay between quotidian practices of sovereignty and the ‘formal’ realm of international politics, which demonstrates how the ‘everyday’ and the ‘international’ are inextricably tied (Salter 2011). On the one hand, constructions of risks and acts of categorization by social actors can impact policy outcome on the international stage. For instance, the comparative study of biosecurity governance has revealed how risk framings by social agents such as consumers, traders and scientists have a significant influence in producing different policy orientations in countries (Maye et al. 2012). Political parties within a country can also mobilize constructions of risks to achieve foreign policy objectives, such as introducing or lifting import bans in the name of national security (Kan and Yuen 2018). On the other hand, enactments of sovereignty remain subject to global power structures, as political actors are constrained by factors such as commitments to trade pacts, economic ties, or diplomatic relations. Examining the intersection of food safety, biosecurity and sovereignty thus requires looking at dynamics not only within countries but also between them, which provides crucial insights into politics ‘at all scales’ – local, national, and international (Higgins and Dibden 2011, 394). The rest of this paper explicates these processes through the case study of Taiwan.

## **Data and methods**

This paper draws upon two major data sources. The first is media narratives related to the outbreak of two food-related epidemics, BSE and ASF. Extant studies have demonstrated that the media is a powerful social institution that shape people's understanding of a particular issue through techniques such as news framing. It serves as the 'mediator' in converging the political sphere and the popular sphere (Giboa 2005). For our research, we first focus on the print media. Using two newspaper database, Wisenews and China Core Newspaper Full-text Database, a total of 392 articles regarding the incidents of BSE and ASF in Taiwan were collated. The articles dated between 2003 and 2019 and were primarily in Chinese, although we also supplemented our research with English-language news articles published by key Western media outlets. In addition to that, we also browse through the Facebook pages and YouTube channels of politicians and government departments to look at how political actors engage with food safety issues on these popular social media platforms.

To gain further insights into how sovereignty is negotiated and constructed through narratives of food safety and biosecurity, we also conducted in-depth interviews with government officials, experts, NGO practitioners, and a number of cattle and pig farmers. A total of eight interviews were conducted in Taiwan in July and August 2020 through referrals and snowballing with the coordination by a research assistant. These interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. The findings provide valuable insights into how food safety relates to the construction process of sovereignty from the perspective of various actors. Details of these interviews are summarized in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

### **Taiwan's food politics under disputed sovereignty**

Taiwan's food politics has long been an arena in which its sovereignty is negotiated, especially in relation to the two superpowers, the US and China. On the one hand, Taiwan has forged a close economic partnership with the US given the need to bandwagon with the long-time ally. In agricultural and food trade, the US is currently Taiwan's biggest import partner, taking up 36 percent of its market share (USAD 2019). Taiwan's dependence on US imports is particularly



pronounced in products like soybeans, corn, wheat, poultry meat, and dairy products, which on average take up around 80 percent of the market. Such dependency was the consequence of the drastic decline of Taiwan's agricultural sector in the 1980s, as a result of industrialization as well as the trade negotiations with the US and the WTO (Huang 1993). In the mid-1980s, the US exerted pressure on Taiwan and later initiated sanctions against it for failing to remove import barriers on American food products. Conceding to US demands, Taiwan loosened import restrictions and implemented tariff reductions on over 100 agricultural products between 1985 and 1987 (Li 1998). Further demands for reducing tariffs and cutting agricultural subsidies were made by the US and other WTO members in Taiwan's accession negotiations in the 1990s, which prompted Taiwan to expand its de-farming policies (Li 1998).

On the other hand, Taiwan's disputed sovereignty has put itself in an unstable trade relationship with China, which is particularly evident in the trade of everyday items such as food. Cross-straits economic exchange has seen rapid growth since the turn of the century as the two sides eased their tense standoff in the 1990s. In 2000, Taiwan's export to and import from China accounted for 3 percent and 4 percent of its total export and import respectively. In 2019, the figures have increased to 28 percent and 20 percent respectively, making China Taiwan's biggest trading partner. Bilateral food trade also increased simultaneously. By 2015, China became Taiwan's fifth largest supplier of food and agricultural products. Due to Beijing's 'charm offensive' (Wong and Wu 2016), Taiwan's agricultural export to China has grown from USD 50 million in 2000 to USD 1.27 billion in 2018, taking up 23 percent of total food export (Council of Agriculture 2018a). Despite the deepening of trade ties, however, cross-straits trade relations have remained fraught with tension. Underlying this is the longstanding suspicions within Taiwanese society of the unification agenda behind China's economic engagement policies. For food products in particular, there has been a growing sense of insecurity that stems from the island's declining food self-sufficiency and food safety issues. The scandal of Chinese melamine-tainted milk powder in 2008, for instance, raised the alarm over the safety of Chinese food imports and escalated into debates about national security. This set the stage for food safety to become a core issue during Taiwan's trade negotiations with China. When the Kuomintang-led government attempted to pass the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement in 2014, food safety was a powerful discourse used by the opposition in conjunction with the potential erosion of national sovereignty to protest against

economic integration with China, since the entry of Chinese businesses into Taiwan might bring in unsafe food products (Kan and Yuen 2018).

All in all, Taiwan's lack of formal recognition for its statehood has made bilateral trade an important arena to negotiate its sovereignty. Trade does not belong solely to the economic realm; it is also an instrument for emitting diplomatic signals: by importing more from the US, Taiwan ensures backing from its important ally and thus maintain its *de facto* sovereignty status; meanwhile, by increasing bilateral trade with China, Taiwan is signalling a more pragmatic approach in cross-straits relations. We illustrate how sovereignty is negotiated and constructed by domestic actors – government departments, politicians, media critics, NGO practitioners, and farmers – through practices of food safety and biosecurity governance based on two case studies. The first concerns Taiwan's beef trade with the US during the BSE outbreak starting from the early 2000s, while the second case focuses on the epidemic prevention effort during the recent ASF outbreak. In both cases, food safety became the quotidian site through which social and political actors negotiated Taiwan's sovereignty status; but the extent to which they were successful varied. During the BSE outbreak, despite numerous discursive attempts by the political opposition to construct sovereignty through anti-US-import rhetoric, the geopolitical need for Taiwan to bandwagon with its powerful ally and the lack of a strong local beef industry fundamentally constrained the ruling government and undermined the power of such narratives. By contrast, the ASF outbreak saw a different outcome. Due to Taiwan's strong pig farming industry, and because of its tense geopolitical standoff with mainland China, the Taiwan government was much more proactive in adopting biosecurity practices to prevent the entry of the disease and protect local pigs. The consumption of local pork has emerged as an everyday symbol and practice through which Taiwan's sovereignty can be effectively performed and projected.

### **Mad Cow Disease and US-Taiwan relations**

The recent global BSE outbreak began in the early 2000s. First identified in the late 1980s in Britain, BSE is a fatal neurodegenerative disease found in cattle that can kill human beings when they eat the infected meat. The disease was discovered again in the US in 2003, which was then the largest beef exporter for Taiwan. Because of its deadliness, BSE sparked widespread panic in Taiwan, leading to a ban on American beef imports followed by a series of trade negotiations with

the US. Given that the US remained Taiwan's key ally, negotiations were difficult and contentious. As this section will show, while the outbreak presented opportunities for political actors to construct Taiwan's sovereignty status under bipartisan politics, it also highlighted the government's vulnerabilities in international trade vis-à-vis US hegemony, both under the KMT and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), even though they took turns to criticize each other for bending to the US.

Taiwan's BSE outbreak erupted in the early 2000s, but its repercussions spanned two decades. The recurring altercations began when the DPP-led government issued an embargo on all beef products from the US after the disease was discovered in 2003. However, under strong American pressure (Zhang and Song 2004), the administration decided to partially resume US beef imports in November 2004, which prompted public outrage. Even though the government argued that the decision to lift the ban was based on science, the public denounced the resumption of import as a submission to external forces that deprived the Taiwanese of 'the sovereignty to eat' (Lin 2005; Wu 2006). The KMT dubbed US beef 'political beef', seeing the relaxation of the ban as a move to gain American support for the DPP in the 2004 re-election (China News Service 2006). Despite opposition from its domestic constituents, the DPP administration continued to relax import restrictions as a result of pressure from the US. The DPP won the 2004 election and continued to adopt a relatively relaxed policy during the subsequent four-year tenure. Though a second ban was briefly reapplied in June 2005 when another BSE case was discovered, it was lifted again in 2006 to allow imports of boneless beef from cattle under 30 months old.

KMT's electoral success in replacing the DPP in 2008 created the expectation that it would adopt a tougher position on US beef trade. However, it turned out that the KMT administration was no different: It signed a protocol with Washington to further lift Taiwan's ban on US bone-in beef. Expectedly, the decision reignited public outcry (Chen 2011). An alliance between civic groups led by the Consumers' Foundation and the DPP condemned the decision as a politically motivated one that put consumers' health at risk (Lin and Chiang 2015). The alliance held a large anti-US beef import campaign in November 2009, gathering 210,000 signatures to protest against the KMT administration (Liberty Times 2009). This also provided opportunities for local-level actors to promote local beef. For instance, the Yunlin County Government joined the crossfire and encouraged Taiwanese people to consume local Yunlin beef, blaming the national government for kowtowing to the US (Tsai 2009). Facing public pressure, the KMT stopped the import of selected

beef parts from countries that had a BSE outbreak history (Lin 2009). In response, Washington censured Taiwan for violating the Protocol and warned that the ban undermined Taiwan's credibility as a US trade partner (Zhang 2009).

While the Taiwanese government's vacillating response opened up opportunities for domestic actors to attack the incumbent administration through discourses of sovereignty, American opprobrium towards Taiwan also revealed the vulnerabilities of Taiwan's sovereignty status and its dependence on the superpower. In 2012, the US stepped up its pressure on Taiwan during negotiations of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, a free trade mechanism that would allow Taiwan to increase its international standing. Washington pegged the talks to the relaxation of beef import, which forced the KMT administration to concede by relaxing the ban on bone-in beef and the use of Ractopamine in beef. In 2015, the embattled administration further eased Taiwan's 11-year-old import ban of US bovine offal, despite renewed fears of the re-emergence of BSE (Kastner 2015). The move drew criticism from the opposition DPP, which condemned the government for trading away citizen's health in order to gain membership in the Transpacific Partnership, a US-led regional trade bloc (Wang, Wu and Wu 2015). Ironically, after the DPP regained the presidency by a landslide victory in 2016, it maintained the policy to relax US beef import. The KMT, now on the opposition, attacked Tsai's administration for contradicting her food safety policy and selling out Taiwan (Lee 2017).

Taiwan's response to the BSE outbreak provides an important window to observe how domestic political actors engaged in the quotidian construction of Taiwanese sovereignty through the rhetoric of food safety. The resumption of bilateral beef trade was framed as a betrayal to Taiwan's common interests and a threat to public health, as well as submission of its sovereignty to foreign powers. Such narratives are characterised by a column in the United Daily News, a pro-KMT paper:

Taiwanese officials behaved like cowards when they encountered the US. Not only do they kowtow to American power, they are also willing to manoeuvre administrative loopholes to relax restrictions on US beef import. Regardless of the recurrence of BSE in the US last year, the Ministry of Health created an ad hoc import standard to pave the way for US imports. This is a complete sell-out of national dignity. (Lin 2005, para.4)

Similar narratives that linked food safety to the erosion of Taiwanese sovereignty continued after the KMT regained power. With the signature of the pro-beef Protocol, pro-DPP media went as far as to portray the KMT government as a ‘village thug’ that forces a vulnerable woman to marry someone whom she did not like (Liberty Times 2009). They condemned the KMT as ‘acting in accordance with the American will’ and as ‘kneeling and deferring to foreign pressure’ (Lin 2009). News reports on the Protocol commonly represented the act as ‘a black-box operation’ (Lin J.Q. 2009) that ‘showcases xenophilic attitude’ (Tsai 2009) and ‘forcibly exploits the rights of the citizens’ (Liberty Times 2009).

Some actors attempted to reassert sovereignty by framing Taiwan beef as more superior to US beef. Invoking scientific claims, they drew a line between ‘safe’ Taiwan beef and ‘contaminated, poisonous, and infected’ US beef. For instance, when the KMT government signed the Protocol to normalize beef trade in 2009, the DPP-run local government of Tainan, a rural county with a relatively sizeable cattle industry, railed that the reopening of US beef trade was ‘intending to destroy the safe and clean local beef [industry].’ They complained that the government ‘showed no effort in promoting the local beef industry but adore so-called ‘*healthy*’ and ‘*clean*’ American beef (Tsai 2009). The Agricultural Department chief of the county seized the opportunity to market local beef, announcing that the county would apply labels on beef produced there to aid consumers in identifying local meat products. The Consumers’ Foundation launched an anti-US beef campaign in 2012, which encouraged citizens to buy local beef products. Although most of these efforts fall short of delineating an action plan of how people should support domestic beef products, they did produce concrete policy changes. The Legislative Yuan, for instance, agreed to prioritize local beef over American beef in the daily meals of the Taiwanese army.

In sum, the safety of American beef became a recurrent theme invoked by both political parties to undermine the ruling government under Taiwan’s intense bipartisan politics. No one was killed by BSE in Taiwan. However, by drawing a clear distinction between ‘good’ Taiwan beef and ‘bad’ US beef, these geopolitical narratives highlighted Taiwan’s precarious sovereignty vis-a-vis the US and attempted to defend it through the promotion of local beef products. It should be noted that this construction process was hampered by an important structural factor. Beef is not a common ingredient in Taiwanese cuisine, and local beef production is small – most of which is associated with the dairy industry<sup>1</sup> – and takes up only around 5 percent of domestic consumption

(Council of Agriculture 2020). There is no sizeable and competitive local beef industry to replace beef imports, in contrast to the case of pork, to which we will now turn.

### **African Swine Fever as existential threat**

The outbreak of ASF, a deadly and highly contagious disease spread among pigs, further illustrates how narratives of food safety contribute to the construction of sovereignty. ASF broke out in China, the world's largest pork producer, in August 2018 and led to the culling of over 100 million pigs within a year (Mason 2018). Although China does not officially export pigs to Taiwan, the disease was discovered in pork products brought from China, which caused widespread concern on the island where pork is a major culinary ingredient. Unlike BSE, there is no evidence that ASF is fatal to human beings. However, because the disease kills pigs and spreads quickly among its population, it is an enormous threat to the pig farming industry and has far-reaching economic implications.

The ASF outbreak occurred amidst two major developments after the BSE incident. The first was the trend of a rising Taiwanese political identity. Numerous surveys indicated that more people are identifying themselves as “Taiwanese” rather than “Chinese” or “both Taiwanese and Chinese” (Wang and Liu 2004; Chen 2013). Zhong (2016) attributes this shift in national identity to external sovereignty-related factors, including a changed state boundary, separation desire from mainland China, and recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. This growing sense of statehood fuelled increased apprehension over Beijing's efforts to influence Taiwanese domestic politics through the media, businesses and NGOs (Wu 2016). The result was the eruption of multiple social movements since the KMT regained power in 2008, most prominently 2014's Sunflower Movement when civic groups demonstrated against a trade pact with China which they feared would enable Beijing to influence Taiwan's strategic industries (Hsu 2017).

Another development was the deterioration in cross-straits relations following the DPP's victory in 2016. Departing from the KMT's China-friendly stance, President Tsai Ing-wen refused to endorse the 1992 consensus that upholds the ‘One China’ principle. Tsai also cut back on economic ties with China and enacted a Southbound policy to build trade relations with Southeast Asian countries. In response, Beijing shifted to a more hard-line policy. An immediate ‘punishment’ was to reduce the quota for the number of Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan and to

pressure international organizations to exclude Taiwan's participation. When the ASF outbreak occurred in 2018, cross-strait relations were shrouded in profound mistrust.

In light of the outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease in 1997, which devastated Taiwan's pig industry (Cheng and Liao 1998), the DPP administration handled the ASF outbreak with caution. Soon after the discovery of ASF in August 2018, the Council of Agriculture (COA) declared that as long as there was no preventive vaccine, the only way to eradicate it was to kill all infected pigs. The government also feared that the price drop in pigs might prompt pork sellers in mainland China to traffick pigs to Taiwan (Lee 2018). As Taiwan did not import any Chinese pork, the principal task of the Tsai administration was to curb cross-strait pork trafficking through border checks and immigration control for travellers.

Despite the adoption of preventive measures, Taiwan detected a first ASF 'case' in October 2018 when a pack of ASF-infected sausages was retrieved by COA officers from a rubbish bin in Kinmen, a Taiwanese island off the coast of China's Fujian Province (Ming Pao 2018). A month later, it was reported that infected sausages were again found with a mainland Chinese traveller entering Taichung. Although ASF was not detected in living pigs and no pigs were culled, ASF-infected food products may infect pigs because food wastes are often used to make pig feed in Taiwan. Thus, to prevent the entry of ASF into the food chain, the government raised the fine of bringing pork products into Taiwan from 15,000 to 300,000 TWD, which was later increased to one million TWD. New technologies were also introduced to monitor the cross-border movement of non-local food commodities, including the purchase of 20 X-ray monitors to prevent the entry of unauthorized meat products (Taiwan Apple Daily 2019). Pig farmers who had visited mainland China were required to undergo quarantine for a week before going back to their farms.<sup>2</sup> Public anxieties reached new heights when a Taiwanese man residing in China was caught for meat trafficking when he returned to Taiwan, revealing loopholes in the border control policy. The man reported that the Chinese side had censored all ASF-related news, and claimed that there was an illegal boat service from Fujian to Penghu that provided an illicit pathway for meat-product trafficking (Du 2019). The incident exposed the vulnerabilities in border control and prompted calls for immediate steps to secure Taiwan against unsafe Chinese meat products.

Cross-strait relations exacerbated after the ASF outbreak. Immediately after ASF was discovered in China, Taiwan requested the PRC government to provide more information on the disease (Dong 2018). The PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office stated that because Taiwan was not an

importer of Chinese pigs, China has no responsibility to report to it about ASF (HKCNA 2018). In February 2019, under continued pressure from Taiwan, Beijing eventually sent updates of ASF to Taiwan's Rural Development Foundation, a government-sponsored NGO. The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), however, criticized that China should reply to Taiwan *via* official channels without 'politicizing' the incident.

Amidst intensifying geopolitical tensions, the ASF outbreak offers another instance for examining how political actors engage in the construction of sovereignty through food safety discourses. Compared with beef, pork is a more important staple in Taiwan. According to the COA (2018b), 37kg of pork are consumed per person annually in 2017, six times greater than the amount of beef. Taiwan also has a sizeable pig farming industry. In the same year, its output value makes up 46 percent of the total livestock farming industry, compared with only 7 percent from local beef. Although the government began to import pork from abroad in 2005, Taiwanese pork still took up close to 90 percent of local consumption recently (compared with 5 percent for local beef). Because of the economic importance of the pig farming industry, and because of the pronounced geopolitical tensions with mainland China, the DPP government adopted a markedly tougher stance towards incoming Chinese pork products. Different from the case of beef where American products are imported into Taiwan through formal trade, the entry of Chinese pork products relied mainly upon inbound travellers and clandestine trafficking networks. The food safety narratives that emerged were thus framed differently. Instead of simply creating a binary opposition between 'safe' local products and 'risky' foreign imports as in the case of BSE, narratives surrounding ASF emphasized the securitization of borders, the victimization of the local pig industry, and geopolitical fears of China's intention to undermine Taiwanese interests.

A survey of collated news reports demonstrates that political actors across the spectrum used highly securitized language such as 'defend', 'block', and 'prevent and control' to describe the preventive measures against ASF, and represented its threat as 'horrifying', 'pressing', and 'imminent'. For instance, Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je described ASF prevention as 'fighting a war.' Kolas Yotaka, spokesperson of the Executive Yuan, alluded to ASF as biosecurity threats when she compared the dead pigs discovered in Kinmen to 'biological bombs.' When visiting Kinmen, Lai Ching-te, then premier of the ROC, vowed to mobilize the spirit of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, a military conflict in 1958 when the PRC shelled the island, to defend against ASF. After the Taiwanese trafficker exposed loopholes in Taiwan's border control, heavier wordings such as



the ‘crumbling of Taiwanese defence’ and the ‘collapse of Taiwan’ were used. As a county magistrate of Taitung cautions, ‘if the province can’t defend against ASF, Taiwan will fall’ (Tsai, 2019). Altogether, these representations created a grand narrative that rallied the Taiwanese public to cooperate in defending against ASF.

Constructions of sovereignty can also be observed through everyday symbolism. One example was the repeated appropriation of braised pork rice (*luroufan*), a popular Taiwanese cuisine, as a quotidian symbol of Taiwan’s sovereignty. Pioneering this effort was top government officials. In December 2018, President Tsai uploaded a Facebook post where she vowed to ‘defend Taiwan pigs and defend Taiwanese braised pork rice’. She later posted a video of her eating the dish in a local eatery with Su Tseng-chang, a veteran DPP politician who became the Premier. Su pleaded in the video that if Taiwan’s pig industry was to collapse, not only would Taiwan lose billions of dollars, ordinary people would also lose their national cuisine (China Times 2019). The video was viewed more than three-hundred thousand times on Facebook. Further exploiting the symbolism of *luroufan*, Su filmed a cooking tutorial featuring the dish as a Chinese New Year greeting to netizens in the Year of the Pig. A similar idea was adopted by the MAC, which used smoked pork (*larou*), another local delicacy. In January 2019, it published a 30-second YouTube video that featured a dystopian story of a family sharing a piece of smoked pork over dinner in 2038, when the entire pig population had been wiped out from Asia because of ASF. The video was viewed over three million times, more than any other videos the department had produced.

The appropriation of these food symbols illustrates how food itself serves as a medium through which social constructions of biosecurity and sovereignty can take place in an everyday context. Our interview with a young COA official revealed that this was intended as a strategy to guide consumer behavior: “We need a symbol to raise awareness on ASF prevention. If we tell them that ASF will hit pig farmers, people will not be able to see how they are affected personally. We need something simple and close to everyday life, like *luroufan*.”<sup>3</sup> The success of this representation is predicated both on geopolitical anxieties towards China as well as Taiwan’s deep-rooted culture of pork consumption and strong pig farming industry. Pig farmers that we interviewed tended to approve of how the government appropriated food symbols to raise public awareness, since ASF reminded them of the devastating impact of hoof-and-mouth disease 23 years ago. One pig farmer, the president of the Taiwan Youth Alliance of Pig Farmers, said that the promotion of these everyday symbols not only relate ordinary people to their dietary habits but

also help rebrand Taiwanese pork and bring it back to the export market.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the government declared in June 2020 that the World Organization for Animal Health has recognized Taiwan as free from hoof-and-mouth disease, after vaccines on local pigs have stopped. This allows Taiwanese pork to be again exported to other countries.

Paradoxically, while the ASF outbreak gave the incumbent DPP the legitimacy to bolster Taiwan's sovereignty status, it also precipitated the further opening of Taiwan's market to US pork despite long-standing worries about the use of Ractopamine, a feed additive. Given the deterioration in cross-strait relations, Tsai has sought political support from the US to avoid marginalization on the international stage. Increasing American pork import thus became a strategy of diplomatic balancing. According to the COA (2019), pork product imports from the US from August 2018 to May 2019 almost doubled that of the same period in 2017-2018. Signs of the relaxation of US pork imports were visible a month after the ASF outbreak, as the vice-chairman of Taiwan External Trade Development Council visited the US and stated Taiwan's willingness to upgrade its trade relationship with Washington (Liao 2018). A US-based Taiwanese diplomat further remarked that Taiwan requires support from the US to withstand an 'authoritarian Goliath' (CNA 2018). In late August 2020, the DPP government officially announced the lifting of restrictions on imports of American beef and pork, specifically beef products from cattle aged 30 months or older as well as pork containing trace amounts of Ractopamine. The historic decision was intended to boost ties with the US and to pave the way for an eventual bilateral trade agreement. Expectedly, it sparked immense controversies given the government's recent supportive stance towards the local pig industry. While the development is still unfolding and goes beyond the scope of this article, the decision aptly highlights Taiwan's dilemma between food safety and trade liberalization as a bandwagoning tactic, as well as the ambiguous role of food as a quotidian site to construct sovereignty.

## **Conclusion**

The increasingly global nature of disease outbreaks has placed issues of food safety and biosecurity at the centre of international trade and geopolitics. For food-related diseases, in particular, the direct threat of contaminated food to livelihoods and economies is giving rise to an anxious state of geopolitics surrounding biosecurity governance and the import of foreign food products. In this

paper, we examined how Taiwan – an island state with contested international status – has responded to the outbreaks of BSE and ASF, which respectively affected its trade ties with the US and China. Based on an analysis of the arising geopolitical discourses, we demonstrated how issues of food safety and biosecurity act as an important platform for observing how sovereignty is constructed and performed through representations and practices. Challenging idealized narratives of international politics as a separate analytical domain, this paper shows how the ‘everyday’ and the ‘international’ are inextricably tied.

By comparing Taiwan’s response in the two outbreaks and its relations with the US and China, this paper further offers insights into the interplay of quotidian practices of sovereignty and global power structures. In our first case, the BSE outbreak raised alarm over the safety of Taiwan’s US beef imports. The incident led to bipartisan quarrels where both political parties used food safety discourses to attack each other for succumbing to the US. Although the relaxation of import bans was widely criticized as a move that undermines sovereignty, the government’s repeated retreat in the face of diplomatic pressure reveals the island state’s precarious sovereign status – exemplified by the need to open up its domestic market to the US in exchange for continued diplomatic and military protection. Despite the prevalence of anti-US-import rhetoric, therefore, the Taiwanese government was ultimately constrained by the geopolitical reality of fragile sovereignty and dependence on external support.

In contrast, Taiwan’s response to the ASF outbreak amidst deteriorating relations with China showcased a different dynamic where highly securitized geopolitical discourse was combined with strong governmental gestures. Even though the risk of contaminated pork imports was comparatively low, the government reacted strongly based on the risk of the illicit entry of infected pigs and pork products into the island. The defence of national boundaries was centre-staged in the construction of sovereignty, which materialized as concrete measures of securitization and border control. The ASF saga also opened up a discursive space for political actors to frame food risks in quotidian terms, tying contaminated pork from China to the PRC’s encroachment upon Taiwanese politics and society. Unfolding during the tenure of the DPP administration, which has long criticized the pro-China stance of the KMT, its opponent party, the incident provided the government with numerous opportunities to bolster its legitimacy by staging collective defensive actions against perceived risks originating from China.

Lacking sovereignty recognition and situated between the two biggest powers in the international system, Taiwan offers a unique context for examining how sovereignty is produced and performed through everyday representations and practices, and how such representational processes can in turn be conditioned and constrained by external geopolitical realities. These observations reassert the insights gained from viewing sovereignty not just as an immutable state of affairs, but a dynamic process open to constant negotiation, boundary-drawing and enactment by social actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview 6.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews 3, 4 and 7.

<sup>3</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interview 5.

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