

Visceral politics across the Strait: Food and risk in China-Taiwan relations

Abstract

The globalization of food systems has led to the increased circulation of food risks across national boundaries. While there is a rich literature on the domestic risk politics of food safety in China, much less attention has been given to the external dimension of China's food safety issues and how these interplay with relations in the international arena. This paper examines the visceral politics of food and risk in China-Taiwan relations. Drawing on the scandal of the export of tainted milk products from China to Taiwan in 2008 and the ongoing food safety debates surrounding the implementation of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), we argue that perceptions of and responses to food risks cannot be considered in isolation from the political, economic and social context of cross-strait relations where different state, societal and media actors interact in the construction of risks. Rather than being a purely technical matter of safety assessment, the identification, representation and management of food risks is shown to be a social process that is contested at all times.

Keywords: Food, risk, China, Taiwan, cross-strait relations

Introduction

The politics of food safety has received growing attention amongst researchers of contemporary China. From melamine-tainted milk powder and fake eggs to contaminated pork and dumplings laced with heavy metals, Chinese society has experienced no shortage of food scandals in recent years. Existing studies have examined how the prevalence of food

crime has eroded institutional trust and intensified social discontent.¹ Chinese citizens have become more active in tackling food safety concerns, not only by developing alternative food networks but also by pursuing collective action strategies.² The country has already seen popular contention both online and offline arising from food safety issues, with the protest activities following the tainted milk scandal being a notable example.³ It has been observed that weakening faith in business ethics and the government's ability to protect its citizens is precipitating 'a risk of distrust' in China that may have 'far-reaching social and political ramifications'.⁴

While there is a rich literature on the domestic risk politics of food safety, however, much less attention has been given to the international dimension of China's food safety issue and the implications it has on foreign policy and interstate relations. This is a crucial research gap to be filled no less because China is the largest producer of food worldwide. While the bulk of food produced is consumed domestically, the country still exports vast quantities of livestock and frozen meats, cereals and soybean, vegetables and fruits, edible oil and canned food products.⁵ The export value of Chinese food and live animals has increased almost twenty times in the past three and a half decades, from US\$2.98 billion in 1980 to US\$58.9 billion in 2014.⁶

Food hygiene, unsafe food and poisonous food have been identified as the three main types of food safety problems within China.⁷ As the country becomes a major player in global food supply chains, these contaminated products have also found their ways to the markets and homes of consumers internationally. In 2008, toxic dumplings imported from China were discovered in Japan following the hospitalization of ten consumers affected by food poisoning.⁸ The incident received saturation coverage in the Japanese media and sparked

widespread fears and controversial speculations on whether it constituted an act of ‘food terrorism’.⁹ Months later, the use of melamine as a protein booster by Chinese manufacturers became an international scandal when worldwide reports of Chinese tainted milk powder shadowed the country’s post-Olympics celebration. Contaminated products were recalled from countries as far apart as Indonesia, Slovakia and Tanzania, while cases of infant sickness were reported in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.¹⁰

The movement of food risks across national boundaries engenders political and foreign policy implications for both exporting and importing countries. For the exporter, the inability to ensure the safety of its products showcases regulatory failure and at the least tarnishes the country’s national image abroad. Following the tainted milk scandal, for example, the Chinese leadership openly acknowledged how the incident had unfavourably influenced perceptions of China and undermined the country’s quest for global power status.¹¹ The export of food risks further jeopardizes external relations and can incur economic costs in the form of import bans and reduced trade.¹² For the importing country, the inability to screen out unsafe products puts pressure on the government and challenges its purported capacity in safeguarding national health. Failure to regulate imported risks often foregrounds debates on national food policy and trade relations, which are directly tied to broader discussions about food self-sufficiency, economic dependency and national security.

Given the centrality of food trade in shaping relations between states, as well as the increasing incidence of global food safety crises, it is important to theorize the external politics of food and risk. In this paper, we examine the role of ‘visceral politics’ in the context of cross-strait relations. The notion has been used by scholars in the critical tradition to illustrate how the body constitutes a visceral domain of politics where power is embodied

and exercised through food and taste.¹³ This paper uses the term visceral politics to not only emphasize how food connects politics with citizens' body and health, but also draw attention to how, in engaging emotions of panic and fear, food risks are mobilized and deployed in political discourses in ways that shape societal perceptions and political outcomes.

Focusing on the export of tainted milk products from China to Taiwan in 2008 and the political crisis that ensued, as well as the ongoing food safety debates surrounding the Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed in 2010, we examine the politics and social processes that underlie the construction and management of food risks in China-Taiwan relations. Drawing on the analytical framework of riskization, we argue that perceptions of and responses to food risks cannot be considered in isolation from the political, economic and social context of cross-strait relations where different state, societal and media actors interact in the construction of risks, which in turn legitimize the deployment of particular risk management strategies. Rather than being a purely technical matter of scientific assessment, therefore, the representation and management of food risks is shown to be a social process that is contested at all times. By demonstrating how food lies at the centre of risk construction in domestic and foreign politics, this paper aims to both broaden the scholarship on food and risk and enrich the study of cross-strait relations.

Theorizing risk

The concept of risk has been extensively drawn upon to analyse food safety issues in contemporary society. In particular, Ulrich Beck's risk society thesis has informed a cross-disciplinary literature of food and health research.¹⁴ Beck's main observation is that modern society has become 'increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced'.¹⁵ Technological advancement and industrialization have created new

forms of manufactured hazards which governments and experts find themselves ill-equipped to deal with, while the challenge of governing risk is further compounded by globalization and the de-localization of risk. Citing the outbreak of BSE or the mad cow disease as an example, Beck observes how global food risks make plain to citizens the inability of governments and expert systems to calculate and control uncertainties.¹⁶ One distinguishing feature of risk society is thus the general loss of faith in the modern institutions of state and science. The failure to assess, manage and communicate risks engenders political costs for state actors as it undermines trust in authority. Referencing Beck's thesis in theorizing risk society in the Chinese context, Yan Yunxiang argues that the proliferation of poisonous food presents 'a clear and present danger to social solidarity and political stability' in Chinese society.¹⁷

While the risk society thesis fittingly demonstrates how risks may challenge institutional authority, as an analytical approach it gives less attention to the production of risk discourses by political actors. Politicians do not just react passively to manufactured dangers; they also participate actively in the identification and framing of what constitute risks in the first place. In this respect, the risk and governmentality literature helps shed light on the social construction of risk. The governmentality approach takes the post-structuralist view that risks are essentially constructs deployed by political actors as 'a method of applying particular governing techniques on particular issues'.¹⁸ It problematizes how certain issues come to be defined as risks in the first place: On the one hand 'nothing is a risk in itself' and 'there is no risk in reality', but on the other hand 'anything can be a risk'; 'it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event'.¹⁹ By treating risks as social constructs, the governmentality perspective places emphasis on unravelling the rationalities underlying risk

construction to examine how risk narratives help those who produce and perpetuate them achieve certain governance goals.²⁰

Deriving insights from both the risk society and governmentality perspectives, this paper adopts what can be characterized as a constructivist approach to theorizing risk.²¹ The constructivist approach diverges from the post-structuralist view in that it does not see risks as being purely artificial and manufactured, but concurs that risks are essentially ‘made real’ socially and politically by actors. In other words, how a certain risk comes to be perceived and defined as ‘real’ is always a mediated process of representation that are directly related to the agency and prerogatives of actors involved and the wider context in which they act.²² This approach does not deny that risks exist, but it does emphasize how their identification and construction is inherently a *social* process that takes place within specific contexts of intersubjective meanings and shared perceptions.

The term ‘riskization’ is employed in this paper to refer to the processes by which risks are identified, represented and managed in specific empirical contexts. The identification of risks and the way they are represented make the case for particular modes and strategies of risk management. Riskization is seen as ‘an inherently social and politically contested process’, whose analysis involves examining how and by whom risk discourses are activated and deployed, in relation to what context, and with what effect.²³ Drawing on the framework proposed by Clapton (2010), this paper directs attention to the ‘who’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions concerning riskization and the impact on domestic and foreign politics.

First, the ‘who’ and ‘how’ questions query the role of agency in the identification and representation of risk.²⁴ Risk identification and assessment entail setting the agenda about

what requires attention and demands action. It is important to examine ‘which actors determine how one set of risks is prioritized ahead of or in place of another’ in ‘arenas of competing political agendas’.²⁵ Who are the key actors involved in producing dominant narratives of risk, and how are these narratives mediated? The role of the media in creating and disseminating risk discourses is central to the analysis. How are prevailing risk discourses contested in the public domain, and in what ways do such attempts shape the process of riskization?

Second, the ‘why’ question queries the broader context in which riskization unfolds. Hook, Mason and O’Shea observe that ‘the quantification and objectification of risk take place and are contested within an intersubjective sphere’.²⁶ Shared meanings, values and experiences directly shape perceptions of risks and societal responses to them. Understanding why riskization takes place the way it does thus entails shedding light on the prevailing norms and collective experiences that shape societal perceptions in ways that lead to the construction of certain issues or actors as risky.

Lastly, risk representation shapes both societal responses to risks and trajectories of state action, with direct implications for state-society relations, dynamics between competing political groups, and relations between states. Domestically, risk identification may serve to legitimize the extension of the state’s reach into new arenas of governance and rationalize institution-building policies for risk management. Alternatively, popular perceptions of risk can mobilize society around the state’s inability to regulate and protect and open up venues for political action. Externally, risk discourses provide rationalization for foreign policy choices by state actors. The framing of risk as posed by another country or organization may legitimize acts of sanctions, trade bans and policy responses branded as measures to eliminate

threats, which directly affect relations of diplomatic and economic exchanges between states.²⁷

Together, the agency, context and impact of riskization constitute the key analytical components of the framework adopted in this paper. This framework enables us to analyse the politics of riskization underlying the construction and management of food risks in China-Taiwan relations from the mid-2000s onwards.

Methodology

Data for this article was collected between 2016 and 2017 and came from three main sources: fieldwork involving interviews and participant observation, media discourses, and data available on government websites. For news reports, a total of 303 articles published in Taiwanese newspapers and news magazines between 2008 and 2016 were collected through keyword search using Wisenews and China Core Newspapers Full-Text Database. Key terms used in our search include food safety (食品安全), food safety issues (食安问题) and poisonous food (有毒食品); we also paired these terms with keywords related to China and bilateral relations such as Chinese imports (中国进口) and cross-strait trade (两岸贸易). Taiwanese news reports were supplemented with those published by mainland Chinese newspapers as well as western media outlets. Articles published by Taiwanese civil society organizations, including the Homemakers United Foundation, Taiwan Food Safety Summit, Taiwan Rural Front and Taiwan Environmental Information Association, as well as postings on media platforms dedicated to food safety issues such as Food Next, were also collected and analysed.

Interviews and participant observation were carried out between December 2016 and January 2017. A total of eight interviews were conducted in person at Taipei and over the phone. Our

interviewees included members of the Legislative Yuan, activists and representatives of civil society organizations, media personnel, and academics researching on food safety issues.

During fieldwork in Taipei, we also attended a conference on food safety regulation organized by units under the National Taiwan University and National Chiayi University. For government policies, regulations, and quantitative data on cross-strait trade, information was collected through the government websites of the Food and Drug Administration, the Council of Agriculture, the Customs Administration, the Bureau of Foreign Trade, and the Mainland Affairs Council.

Food, sovereignty and risk perceptions across the Taiwan Strait

Economic exchange between China and Taiwan has seen rapid growth since the turn of the century. In 2001, China accounted for 4.7% of Taiwan's international trade volume; by 2015, this figure has increased to 22.7%.²⁸ Bilateral food and agricultural trade has also increased over the years. The value of Taiwanese imports of live animals, animal and vegetable products, fats and oils, prepared foodstuffs, beverages and tobacco from China has doubled from US\$320 million in 2005 to US\$636 million in 2015.²⁹ By import value, China is Taiwan's fifth largest supplier of food and agricultural products after the United States, Brazil, Japan and New Zealand as of 2015.³⁰

Despite increases in volume and value, however, trade and economic relations across the strait have remained fragile and fraught with tension. This is due first to longstanding suspicions within Taiwanese society of the political agenda behind China's economic engagement policies, as well as a growing sense of insecurity that stems from the island's declining food self-sufficiency and increased reliance on imports. Both factors form the

crucial context in understanding risk perceptions within Taiwanese society concerning China, particularly with regard to food and agricultural trade.

First, the geopolitical imperative of reunification underlying China's economic engagement of Taiwan has cultivated popular distrust towards Beijing, as manifested in the opposition to closer economic integration. The use of trade and economic incentives as a means of co-opting Taiwanese society has been a prominent feature of Beijing's policy towards Taiwan,³¹ and this has been viewed with caution especially by opposition groups such as the Democratic People's Party (DPP).³² Following the DPP's historic victory in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, which ended the five-decade rule of the Kuomintang (KMT), Beijing stepped up its engagement strategy in the bid to build popular support for closer cross-strait relations. It initiated the establishment of a bilateral economic cooperation mechanism with the KMT and made a series of unilateral concessions involving Taiwanese fruit exports to China in 2005 and 2006.³³ Known as Beijing's 'fruit offensive', the succession of preferential policies was seen as a 'united front' strategy aimed at increasing support for closer relations with China amongst rural constituencies in southern Taiwan, where the DPP has been gaining electoral strength.³⁴ Beijing's manoeuvre heightened risk perceptions concerning the deepening of asymmetric interdependence in cross-strait relations: Taiwan's economic reliance on China is seen as giving the latter diplomatic leverage, and underlined the concern that China's stronger position in bilateral trade would enable it to exert political pressure on the Taiwanese government.³⁵

Another factor in contextualizing risk perceptions and food risk discourses is Taiwan's dwindling food self-sufficiency. Rapid industrialization since the 1970s had been accompanied by the shrinking of Taiwan's agricultural sector, resulting in the loss of

farmland and a diminishing supply of farm labour.³⁶ Trade negotiations with powers such as the United States and accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) further led to cutbacks in agricultural subsidies, the enforcement of de-farming policies, and the loosening of restrictions on food imports from abroad.³⁷ Between 1985 and 2010, Taiwan's calories-weighted food self-sufficiency rate dropped from 56.1% to 31.3%.³⁸ The decline in food self-sufficiency has heightened sensitivity towards the safety of imported food products. In recent years there has been growing concern within Taiwanese society regarding the need to reduce dependence on imports and bolster food self-sufficiency through re-localization. While China was not alone in precipitating food safety concerns – Taiwan imposed a ban on US beef following the outbreak of mad cow disease in 2003, and there has been ongoing protests against Japanese food imports following the Fukushima nuclear meltdown – perceptions of China as a source of risk has accentuated fears surrounding the import of tainted Chinese food products.

Case studies

In the following, we analyse two cases to examine the politics and process of riskization concerning safety issues in China-Taiwan food trade. The first case is the tainted milk scandal, which broke out in China in July 2008 after a group of infants in Gansu Province were diagnosed with kidney stones. The case aroused public panic in Taiwan and escalated into a political crisis for the KMT administration as it emerged that some 25 tons of tainted milk products had been exported to Taiwan. The second case concerns the food safety debates surrounding the ECFA negotiations that unfolded between 2009 and 2015. The ECFA is a foundation agreement to subsequent cross-strait trade pacts in goods and services. Its signing in 2010 heralded closer economic partnership with China and precipitated a series of society-wide protests that capitalized on popular perceptions of risks.

Comparing these two cases will reveal how the process of riskization unfolded around food safety issues and how risk discourses extended to embody new frames with new events or actors. By presenting the two cases chronologically, our analysis will demonstrate the evolution of food risk discourses in Taiwan in the context of the changing political climate since the mid-2000s.

Tainted milk scandal, 2008

In September 2008, days after news came out that melamine-laced milk powder had caused infants in China to fall ill, Taiwanese consumers were alerted by Chinese officials at the Taiwan Affairs Office that some of these tainted products had been exported to Taiwan.³⁹ Although Taiwan's Ministry of Health and Welfare ordered the immediate destruction of the tainted goods and suspended the importation of all milk products from China, widespread panic ensued when traces of melamine were discovered in various milk-related food products. That some of these appeared to have been sold to Taiwanese consumers set off a chain reaction of consumer food scares over a range of products including bread, instant coffee and canned soups, causing substantial financial losses for the implicated companies.

As the scandal deepened and a widening scale of contamination was reported, the Ministry of Health and Welfare attempted to temper the crisis by adjusting the maximum legal limit of melamine in milk-containing products downwards to 2.5 ppm, a level adopted by Hong Kong regulators. The ill-conceived move generated a backlash. Politicians from the DPP attacked the KMT government for its poor crisis management and failure in safeguarding Taiwanese interests. A DPP politician argued that the measure implied that 'human lives in Taiwan are not as valuable as those of pigs in China', as the maximum level of melamine legally

permitted in pig feed produced in China was only 2.0 ppm. The backlash escalated the scandal into a political crisis for the KMT government, and prompted health minister Lin Fang-yue to step down just four months after the inauguration of the new Ma Ying-jeou administration.

Riding on popular sentiments, a 'China-Free' campaign was proposed by several DPP councillors that advocated a ban on all Chinese imports and the consumption of 'high-quality Taiwanese products'.⁴⁰ This was followed by the organization of the 'Safeguard Taiwan Rally' (反黑心、顧台灣大遊行) by the DPP and Taiwan Solidarity Union in October 2008. The protest denounced the KMT government for failing to prevent the import of 'black-hearted' Chinese food exports, and for promoting economic integration with China at the expense of Taiwan's sovereignty. Rally organizers claimed an attendance of 600,000 people, making it the largest anti-government protest since the KMT regained power.⁴¹ The demonstration was scheduled to coincide with the week before Chen Yunlin's visit to Taiwan for talks with the Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF). Chen was the chief of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), and his visit represented the first of such occasions by an official Chinese envoy. DPP legislators openly urged Ma to demand a formal apology and compensation from the PRC government.

As an issue intimately connected with citizens' health, food provides unique perspectives into the social processes of risk construction and management. The tainted milk scandal illustrates how food risk was represented and mediated in light of Taiwanese society's growing distrust towards China. A representative of Taiwan Rural Front, an NGO that focuses on environmental activism, pointed out how Taiwan's strained relationship with China directly informed societal interpretation and construction of risk:

Even though Taiwan had completely banned Chinese milk products, people were still worried because they did not trust the KMT's management of cross-strait relations. The scandal was especially mixed with emotions because Taiwan has an ambiguous relationship with China. Many saw the export of unsafe food by China as an act of bullying Taiwan.⁴²

Such perceptions directly relate to how the government's inept reaction to the scandal was attributed to its unwillingness to stand up to Beijing. The incompetence of the KMT administration in regulating food risks was framed by opposition parties as a reflection of its readiness to compromise Taiwanese interests in cross-strait negotiations. Tsai Ing-wen, then chairperson of the DPP, cast doubt on the KMT's trustworthiness as a defender of Taiwan's national interests: 'If the government failed to deal with the milk scandal, how could it be trusted with issues of sovereignty?'⁴³ Ma Ying-jeou was further denounced for exchanging Taiwan's political sovereignty for closer economic partnership with China.⁴⁴

The media also played a key role in the construction and dissemination of risk discourses, including narratives representing China as the origin of poisonous foods that place Taiwanese health at risk. A representative from the Taiwan Food Safety Summit pointed out how media outlets have served as 'risk amplifiers' in drawing attention to safety issues.⁴⁵ This role can be observed from the reportage of food scandals. While domestic food scandals have a long history in Taiwan – with incidents including the PCB poisoning in 1979, cadmium rice in 1982 and fake olive oil in 2005 being infamous examples – it was the import of tainted milk products from China that played a critical part in mobilizing the public. According to a DPP legislator, 'because of the melamine scandal Taiwanese society began to pay more attention to food safety issues and retraced our history of food contamination.'⁴⁶ The activating role of the melamine scandal can be observed in a trend analysis of the keyword 'food safety'.

Figure 1 shows its frequency in Taiwanese newspapers from 2000 to 2016. It saw an almost tenfold increase in 2008 as compared with the average frequency between 2000 and 2007. Media scrutiny on food safety issues continued in the early 2010s, including reports on domestic scandals such as the plasticizer scandal in 2011, the toxic starch scandal in 2013, and the gutter oil scandal in 2014.

[Insert Figure 1]

The identification and representation of risks shape and legitimize differential responses. While for opposition parties the food risks revealed by the tainted milk scandal advanced their call for a stronger stance vis-à-vis Beijing and the need to reduce reliance on Chinese imports, for the KMT government they provided the justification for alternative risk management strategies. Ma Ying-jeou announced that even though the scandal had exposed ‘risks’ in deepening cross-strait relations, it also gave Taiwan a chance to turn ‘crisis into opportunity’ by promoting further institution-building with the Chinese government.⁴⁷ This paved the way for the signing of the Cross-Strait Food Safety Agreement during the ARATS-SEF meeting in November 2008. The agreement guaranteed the prompt notification of food safety issues in cross-strait trade and the establishment of a coordination mechanism. Despite the administration’s strategy of managing food risks through institution-building, however, the fact that it failed to secure compensation from China for the tainted milk scandal foreshadowed further contention over the KMT’s ability to defend Taiwan’s interests in trade talks with Beijing.

Cross-strait trade negotiations, 2009-2015

Rather than being a single scandal, the second case examined consists of a series of food risk debates surrounding Taiwan's trade negotiations with China. The debates began around 2009 as negotiations for the ECFA started, and continued into the mid-2010s during which negotiations for a series of follow-up trade pacts, particularly the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), were underway. The second case displays several differences from the first. In terms of agency, while the construction of risks in the tainted milk scandal involved largely opposition parties and the media, the food safety debate during the trade negotiations also drew in student activists, opinion leaders and NGOs under a period of heightened social activism. Furthermore, while the tainted milk scandal focused attention on government ineptness and reinforced the risk perception of Chinese food products as unsafe, risk discourses in the trade negotiations diversified and extended the narrative to matters of sovereignty. Closer trade relations with China was portrayed as a source of risk to Taiwan because it would induce economic dependence and undermine Taiwan's 'food sovereignty' – the ability to maintain local control over food production and achieve self-sufficiency.

Discussions regarding ECFA started in December 2009 and the two sides signed the agreement in June 2010 despite mass protests.⁴⁸ Although the KMT government promoted ECFA as an agreement that would facilitate Taiwan's integration into the global economy, the negotiations invoked worries that deepening economic ties would open the door to risky Chinese imports. A survey conducted in 2009 displayed popular anxieties about the ECFA: 73 percent of Taiwanese respondents were concerned about unsafe Chinese imports, while 51 percent expressed unease over increased reliance on China.⁴⁹ An editorial of the pro-independence *Liberty Times* published in December 2009 articulated such apprehensions:

The most worrying aspect is food safety. [...] Taiwan and China have set up notification and coordination mechanisms, but there is no progress on establishing inspection standards, checks on origin of manufacture,

and import-export supervision. Existing measures cannot comprehensively constrain ‘black-hearted’ Chinese companies. [...] If China merely pays lip service to such ‘agreements’, it only fuels worries that the ECFA, given the opaque negotiation process, would bring greater harm to Taiwan.⁵⁰

Following the signing of ECFA, negotiations began for the CSSTA, an agreement that would liberalize trade in services between China and Taiwan. The CSSTA further galvanized popular fears as it was seen as a definitive stride towards the normalization of cross-strait economic relations.

Food risk was widely drawn upon by opponents of the agreement to vocalize and mobilize opposition. One of the dominant risk discourses was that the CSSTA would open up Taiwan’s market to Chinese catering businesses and thereby expose Taiwanese consumers to the tainted food imports used by these companies. An example was herbal medicine imported from China, which took up 90 percent of Taiwan’s domestic consumption. It was speculated that if Chinese companies are allowed to invest in the domestic herbal medicine industry under the CSSTA, they could import unsafe products from China to the detriment of consumers’ health.⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that the successive outbreak of domestic food scandals in Taiwan between 2013 and 2014 served to reinforce such risk perceptions, though the tainted products originated locally. A critic argued in an op-ed that the business models that had resulted in the local scandals would be emulated by Chinese companies: ‘Once Taiwan passed the CSSTA, Chinese businessmen keen on promoting black-hearted Chinese products would use low price to capture the Taiwan market, following what [unscrupulous Taiwanese companies] did to seize market share.’⁵² By using inferior products, Chinese companies would out-compete Taiwanese counterparts and crowd out local businesses, with the consequence of undermining overall food safety in Taiwan. An economics professor of

the National Taiwan University, Jang Show-ling, reflected such worries in a widely circulated analysis:

Once we open up our market, Chinese companies will introduce many cheap products and employ the strategy of predatory pricing to oust local players. They will then use monopoly pricing to oppress consumers. [...] The market will be full of 'black-hearted' products.⁵³

The process of riskization surrounding the CSSTA negotiations unfolded in a context of social activism and heightened scepticisms towards deepening ties with China. The period following the tainted milk scandal witnessed a growth in student-led anti-China activism, beginning with the Wild Strawberries Movement in 2008 in protest of Chen Yunlin's Taiwan visit. In 2012, student activist groups led another large-scale protest against media monopolization targeting the merger plans of Want Want China Times Group, part of a conglomerate with pro-Beijing stance that has extensive interests in China.⁵⁴ The publication of an influential book around the same time further shaped perceptions of China's geopolitical manoeuvring. Written by Taiwanese scholar Wu Jieh-min, *A Third View of China* proposed the notion of 'China Factor' (中國因素) to characterize the economic and political power that China wields in influencing domestic politics in neighbouring states.⁵⁵ By crystalizing Taiwanese's rising distrust towards China, the notion became hugely influential among activists and provided a mobilizational framework for subsequent protests.

Growing threat perceptions contributed to the extension of societal risk discourses from narratives of unsafe food to threats to self-sufficiency and 'food sovereignty'. As a notion that has gained increasing traction amongst agrarian movements around the world, 'food sovereignty' advocates the right of peoples to healthy and ecologically produced food as well as people's 'right to define their own food and agriculture systems'.⁵⁶ Distinct from the concept of food security which emphasizes access to sufficient food regardless of method and

location of production, food sovereignty highlights the ability of peoples to secure the right to local food production.⁵⁷ In Taiwan, civil society groups such as Taiwan Rural Front and the Homemakers' United Foundation played key roles in appropriating and adapting the term to local contexts to protest against the devastating effect of free trade on domestic agriculture. These groups, particularly the former, have been active in organizing movements to protect farmland and natural resources and promote community economy in rural Taiwan.⁵⁸

While food sovereignty serves as a broad framework for activism against free trade, it was also invoked in opposing the liberalization of food trade with China. Indeed, the notion of food sovereignty takes on a distinctive geopolitical meaning in Taiwan given its unique international status and lack of formal recognition as a sovereign nation-state. Surrounding the CSSTA negotiations, the threat to food sovereignty has been brought to the forefront of domestic debates as it emerged that the soon-to-be-signed agreement might eventually lift Taiwan's existing import ban on 830 Chinese agricultural products. The ban was introduced when Taiwan joined the WTO in 2002, after which the government gradually removed tariffs on nearly 1,300 types of Chinese agricultural imports, except those in the banned list such as rice, red bean and peanuts.⁵⁹ The anticipation of trade liberalization galvanized fears that free trade would further harm domestic agriculture and erode food self-sufficiency. In February 2013, civil society groups jointly organized a rally in front of the Presidential Office Building to protest against free trade and trade liberalization with China. Protestors pointed out how the potential lifting of the ban on agricultural products would directly hit Taiwanese farmers and accelerate land grabs. The failure to defend food sovereignty, it was emphasized, would be an affront to Taiwan's sovereignty.⁶⁰

The linkage of food risk discourses to sovereignty threats was further developed and articulated in what became known as the Sunflower Movement. Unfolding in 2014, the movement was the culmination of protest activism against the controversial CSSTA. The movement's participants opposed the trade pact not only for its lack of legislative transparency and adverse economic impact, but also on the grounds that deepening trade relations would create over-dependence on the Chinese economy which, they argued, would enable Beijing to influence Taiwan's policymakers and gain access to its strategic industries.⁶¹ Revealingly, some critics used unsafe food as a metaphor to frame the trade deal as 'black-hearted' (黑心服貿), tainted as it were by China's national unification agenda in recovering Taiwan. As blogger Yang Shanghan put it in his widely read article on the benefits and drawbacks of CSSTA,

The economy might improve after the signing of CSSTA, but the agreement would place 40 percent of Taiwan's GDP in the hands of a country politically and militarily hostile to Taiwan. Should the two sides antagonize each other, Taiwan's economy would be the first to collapse. This undermines the freedom of our democracy - elected politicians will have to act at the behest of China.⁶²

The Sunflower Movement culminated in the 24-day occupation of the Legislative Yuan by students and NGO activists in March 2014 and had far-reaching impact on Taiwan's domestic politics.⁶³ In face of intensifying public pressure, the KMT government eventually conceded to protest demands and announced the suspension of CSSTA negotiations. Despite the concession, criticisms continued to mount against the KMT's wavering stance over the free trade agreement.⁶⁴ Its inability to regain the public's confidence foreshadowed the KMT's landslide defeat first at the local elections in November 2014, and then at the presidential and parliamentary elections in early 2016.

Conclusion

As food systems become increasingly globalized, the export and import of unsafe products has placed food at the centre of an emerging visceral politics involving the identification, construction and management of food risks. Indeed, ‘food gives particular insights into the process of building risk perception because it bridges citizens’ bodies and their health [...] and the global market to which food trade is vital’.⁶⁵ Rather than being a technical matter of scientific assessment, therefore, this paper has shown the politics of riskization underlying food safety to be an inherently social process characterized by continual construction and contestation by state and societal actors. Taiwanese perceptions of and responses to the food risks posed by China cannot be considered separately from the broader political, economic and social context where dominant risk discourses concerning issues such as economic interdependence, food self-sufficiency and national sovereignty are produced. These articulations of risks became intertwining discourses as each constructs and perpetuates the other, propagated through the agency of various actors including political parties, civil society organizations, public intellectuals, activists and the media.

From the perspective of external relations, growing risk perceptions concerning China paralleled a period of downturn in cross-strait relations, with the one reinforcing the other. The KMT suffered electoral defeat in 2014, and in 2016 the DPP regained the presidential seat and secured a majority in the Legislative Yuan. Incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen discontinued the KMT’s Beijing-friendly policy and withheld acknowledgement of the 1992 consensus, a tacit agreement reached between the KMT and the CCP on the ‘One China’ principle with each side holding its own interpretation of what ‘China’ means. In response, Beijing switched to a more hard-line position and applied economic and political pressures on

Taiwan, from restricting the number of visiting Chinese tourists to establishing ties with some of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic allies in the international arena.

Domestically, the circulation of risk narratives concerning trade liberalization both globally and with China has been accompanied by the strengthening of movements with a nativist agenda in Taiwan. The promotion of food sovereignty and localization of food production by civil society groups such as Taiwan Rural Front is one example of such developments. In other countries, the construction of risks deriving from dangerous food imports has invigorated expressions of culinary nationalism and provided the legitimization for movements that promote the production and consumption of national food products.⁶⁶ Whether and how the visceral politics of food and risk in the China-Taiwan context may animate similar activism in Taiwan is a topic for further research.

Notes

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