Does Food Safety Seriously Threaten China and the CCP's Authority?

Importance of Food Security and its Challenges.
Food is often an overlooked commodity, however, its importance is profound and omnipresent. China, the world's second most populated country of 1.4 billion people, has fed its population on just 9% of the world's arable land (Chen et al., 2022). Its rapid industrialisation in farming has supported its unprecedented socio-economic growth and maintained relative food security. Despite its successes, there remain multidimensional complications to its food supply. To sustain its vast population and growing consumer demands, China increased its food imports, reaching a $45 billion trade deficit in 2017 (China Power, 2020).

A major threat to China's national food security plan is the inadequacy of food safety regulations. Food safety has significant impacts on public health from obesity to severe illness. Extensive use of food additives has led to several high-profile food incidents such as the Milk Scandal in 2008 (Zhe, 2008). Food safety concerns have therefore been placed at the forefront of the public consciousness. Meanwhile, the overuse of chemicals to increase crop yields can cause pollution and a decline in soil fertility, affecting the quality of future crops. Unsustainable practices can threaten food safety and have long-term implications for China's future food supply. With the rise of these issues, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has pushed major legal and social drives to improve its food safety.

Dai's Garden.
Dai's Garden, a privately published documentary directed by Xu (2017), follows Dai Jianjun's "farm-to-table" restaurant in China, highlighting alarming food safety issues. Dai outlines his dissatisfaction with rapid urbanisation and industrialisation and their adverse effects on the erosion of traditional rural culture; widespread issues from profiteering in the food industry; and the extensive pollution of rural farmlands.

Concerns over food safety are first introduced by Dai's worries about people's health from eating processed and junk foods, further supplemented by statistics of "3,500 food safety scandals" being reported between 2004-2015. This idea is developed throughout the documentary through Dai's interaction with rural farmers, quoting one who said "In cities, meat may not be meat; vegetables may not be vegetables", exposing the contribution of additives alongside poor perceptions of food safety.

Dai then shifts the focus to the effects of urban sprawl and industry on the pollution of farmland. His prevailing belief that villages support the growth of cities introduces the "green food concept", stressing the importance of responsibly sourced crops. His reasoning seems two parts: in support of traditional rural lifestyles and for safe, unpolluted crops. Dai's non-profit academy attempts to revitalise rural culture, educating children and attracting them back to rural villages.

Dai's Struggle.
Xu's direction conveys a melancholic tone throughout the documentary. The contrast between Dai's humble non-profit values and greedy urban businesses illustrates his isolation from modern society. Sadly his family doesn't seem to understand his principles, implying that this was the main contributor to his failed marriage. Despite this, Dai seems to have found happiness and acceptance in rural villages. Themes of cultural erosion are coupled with feelings of loss, alongside Dai's reminiscence of his rural childhood. Despite his solitude, he's satisfied with his achievements, highlighting his hope of preserving rural culture.

As an ethnic Chinese born in Britain, I have always been aware of my disconnection from my cultural heritage. Dai highlights the loss of traditional cuisines due to urban migration removing people from the rich culture of their villages. This has been reflected in my limited experiences with Chinese culture as a result of emigration. An MDPI sustainability journal (Bu et al., 2020), suggests that less "traditionally oriented" people were more likely to purchase unhealthy fast foods over nutrient-rich local cuisines. Xu's documentary has allowed me to evaluate the implications of lost culture and urban migration promoting the consumption of processed food over traditional dishes.

The severity of Dai's worries over Food Safety.
Dai's concerns over food safety are legitimate! An increasingly competitive food industry promotes reliance on food additives, reducing costs but risking public health. The 2008 Chinese milk scandal led to the death of 6 and the illnesses of 300,000 children from kidney stones after the ingestion of melamine-laced milk. Melamine use was driven by profit: the additive boosted measured protein content and enabled farmers to "sneak watered down milk past protein spot checks" (Reshanov, 2018). The scandal erupted into public outcry and initiated movements for greater control over food safety.

The PRC's constant strive for self-sufficiency has driven its dependence on chemicals to reach its crop yield targets. A report by Quianhu Li et al (2021) published their food safety concerns, where fertiliser and pesticide overuse polluted agricultural land and caused an "accumulate [of] toxic substances in the agricultural product." Furthermore, they highlighted the "vicious circle between pollution and food production" whereby more fertiliser is constantly needed to grow crops on degrading soil quality despite increasing the chemical residues in food products. This problem is one reason for Dai's insistence on organic food from remote villages that are untouched by industrialisation.

Dai's belief in the slow-food movement campaign utilises additive-free traditional cooking to improve public health while promoting traditional village farming techniques for safe, organic produce. In contrast, the CCP has implemented top-down, strict food safety regulations.

Food Safety Difficulties and the CCP Response.
The CCP has always been wary of its food security. Historically, food crises have catalysed popular rebellions that toppled dynasties. With the lingering effects of the Great Famine, CCP leadership "consistently prioritised food security as an indispensable prerequisite to maintaining power" (Liu, 2023). Gries (2023a) suggests the importance of consumption as compensation for popular loyalty and gratitude for the CCP. Therefore, a high quality of life

legitimises the CCP's rulership, and failure to meet consumer demands can threaten its authority.

A challenge confronting food security is China's rapid population growth and increasing consumer demands. In 2021, China's population reached 1.44 billion with "over a hundred cities with populations over one million" and over half a billion people migrating from rural countryside to urban cities since 1980 (Gries, 2023b). The movement away from self-sufficient rural agricultural life indicates a higher dependence on industrial agriculture. The CCP must therefore strengthen its food supply chain to accommodate the continued growth of cities. A Beijing poll indicated that over 77% of people consider food safety as the "most important quality of life issue" (China Daily, 2015), suggesting urban popular demand for food quantity and quality. To meet its consumer demands, China has over-exploited fertilisers and pesticides for a short-term boost in crop yield. Misuse of fertilisers causes major pollution, with only 30% of fertilisers in China being used effectively (Meng, 2012). China's need to meet future production targets must be balanced with the management of chemical use and its effects on pollution and food quality

The CCP improved its regulation of the national food supply chain in response to rising food safety awareness. Revisions to China's Food Safety Law in 2015 introduced systems for food traceability and risk assessments for chemicals and additives (UNEP-LEAP, 2015). Furthermore, the CCP set a precedent for hardline responses to food safety violations by executing 2 and imprisoning 19 after the 2008 milk scandal (Branigan, 2009). Critics of this method have scrutinised the price and effectiveness of monitoring China's vast food supply network, which consists of mainly small-scale workshops and unregistered informal producers (Chung & Wong, 2012). While legislation is necessary, the authoritarian style approach has "inadequate state regulatory capacity" to maintain its "exclusive state domination" on food monitoring, failing to achieve China's food safety ambitions (Kang, 2019).

In contrast, bottom-up, coregulation strategies implemented in Shenzhen have successfully shifted the responsibilities of state supervision to the interdependence of joint public and private regulation (Liu et al., 2019). The erasure of strict, legislative monitoring has relieved the strain on administrative resources while empowering private sectors to self-regulate. Shenzhen's success is a clear example of Chinese innovation and adaptability to changing food safety demands. The CCP's gradual development of its national food safety standards addresses many prominent safety issues from the last decade, indicating a clear recognition of the concerns of the Chinese people. Robust food safety systems will rely upon the government's ability to "learn from past challenges and adopt best practices" to constantly update its approaches and pioneer new food safety systems (Zhang et al., 2018). Continued successes can satiate consumer demands and support China's development.

Can China confront its Food Safety Problem and why does it matter?
Inadequate state responsibility for food safety, exposed by "Dai's Garden", threatens public health. Agricultural goals set by the CCP have boosted short-term crop production at the expense of sustainability and safety. Furthermore, poor food regulation disrupts the CCP's ability to monitor food safety and additive use. Dai highlights the increasing prominence of these issues with continued urbanisation. While Dai follows a small-scale campaign celebrating traditional rural practices, the CCP attempts to produce a wide-reaching policy to

standardise food regulation and satisfy its vast population. Despite limited success, it indicates a positive trend toward better food safety considerations.

Despite failures, China's innovation of new strategies and technologies shows its ability to develop unique solutions. Coregulation strategies and technologies, such as the new blockchain food traceability system, can reliably monitor the food supply chain and restore consumer confidence in the market (SQLI, 2020). China's challenges make domestic food safety one of the most difficult among developed countries. However, it leads global approaches to food safety, encouraging international cooperation for greater food security.

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