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## Food Supply and Food Safety Issues in China

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### Abstract

Food supply and food safety are major global public health issues, and are particularly important in heavily populated countries such as China. Rapid industrialisation and modernisation in China are having profound effects on food supply and food safety. In this Review, we identified important factors limiting agricultural production in China, including conversion of agricultural land to other uses, freshwater deficits, and soil quality issues. Additionally, increased demand for some agricultural products is examined, particularly those needed to satisfy the increased consumption of animal products in the Chinese diet, which threatens to drive production towards crops used as animal feed. Major sources of food poisoning in China include pathogenic microorganisms, toxic animals and plants entering the food supply, and chemical contamination. Meanwhile, two growing food safety issues are illegal additives and contamination of the food supply by toxic industrial waste. China's connections to global agricultural markets are also having important effects on food supply and food safety within the country. Although the Chinese Government has shown determination to reform laws, establish monitoring systems, and strengthen food safety regulation, weak links in implementation remain.

### Introduction

China's population is anticipated to peak at 1.4 billion in 2025,<sup>1</sup> and the country's demographic transition is being accompanied by rapid economic growth and a nutritional transition involving increased consumption of animal products and edible oils.<sup>2</sup> The vast size of China's food production and consumption enterprises, along with the country's global economic importance, make China's food supply and food safety issues of major interest to international markets and trading partners. We review the major food supply and safety issues facing China in this context, connecting these issues with global trends and analysing key policy options available to China to stabilise food supplies and improve food safety in years to come.

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#### Contributors

H-ML wrote the overall draft and created the figures and tables. JR contributed to the writing, with a special focus on the food safety, micronutrient, and water pollution sections, and improved the overall language of the manuscript. M-CF, LX, and SS-MS crosschecked and revised the contents. SS-MS coordinated the preparation of this Review.

#### Conflicts of interest

We declare that that we have no conflicts of interest.

Historically, food security has played a crucial role in public health in China.<sup>3,4</sup> China went through 3 years of famine in the middle of the last century, and although data on effects of the famine are sparse, mortality attributable to starvation in that period has been estimated at tens of millions of people.<sup>5</sup> National mortality rates were 1.46% in 1959, 2.54% in 1960, and 1.43% in 1961,<sup>6</sup> and in 1960 the mortality rate exceeded the birth rate.<sup>6</sup> A legacy of this formative public health tragedy is that food supply, price, and availability continue to be high priorities on China's national agenda.

After the famine, in the decades following the late 1970s, China went through rapid economic growth, industrialisation, and modernisation, and this rapid development, as well as an increasing population, placed new strains on the national food supply. In 1995, Lester Brown published his classic text *Who Will Feed China*,<sup>7</sup> sending a wake-up call to global policy makers and warning that China's large population and the conversion of arable land for urbanisation and industrialisation might eventually lead to a large gap between food demand and production in China. Such a situation would place substantial strain on global markets for agricultural products, potentially destabilising global food security. Here, we revisit the status of China's food supply nearly two decades after this seminal publication, and examine the extent to which food security issues have coincided with trends in food supply, price, and availability. We then examine China's shifting attention from food supply issues to food safety concerns.

### Key factors that affect China's food supply: land, water, soil, and diet

Environmental factors affecting agricultural productivity are in part summarised by the Chinese character for food (panel). The country's food supply is a function of China's large population, the quantity and quality of arable lands, climatic factors, water supply and scarcity, the abundance of micronutrients in soil, and other factors. China has only 7–9% of the world's arable land, but more than 20% of the world's population,<sup>8</sup> and thus the country's arable land per person is well below the global average (figure 1A). Furthermore, the area of arable land has been decreasing for the past 50 years, due in part to soil erosion and land conversion associated with urbanisation and industrialisation. Arable land for food crops also faces competition from economic non-food crops; for instance, despite the strong demand for food crops, cotton production has occupied a stable and substantial portion of the arable land throughout the past few decades as a result of its economic value (appendix).

#### Panel: The etymology of the Chinese character for food

The traditional understanding of food in Chinese culture is embedded in a composite character, 饗, meaning food in Chinese. This Chinese character summarises the environmental factors that help or limit agricultural productivity in China. The subpart 廩, means rice or is a collective term for cereal, which is the staple crop for Chinese people. To grow crops, 日, the sun, is needed to provide photosynthetic energy and warm temperatures, but appropriate climatic conditions (eg, rainfall) are also needed and thus depend on 天, a simplistic representation of the sky. Labour and agricultural inputs are added to 田, the field, but ultimately the field is composed of 土, earth, which controls agricultural productivity via constituents of the soil, its structure, and other properties.

Of the available arable land in China, only about 40% is classified as the highest grade (most suitable for crop production), with much of the remaining area subject to environmental stresses such as drought and high salinity content.<sup>9</sup> The highest value arable land is located in three large alluvial plains: the Northeast China Plain, the North China Plain, and the Yangtze Plain.<sup>9</sup> These regions comprise the exact stretch of land along China's eastern coast that has undergone the most intensive urbanisation,<sup>10</sup> and the area represents the front line

of the struggle to balance agricultural and urban land use. Meanwhile, in much of China's vast northern territories, such as in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the northern part of Heilongjiang, the cumulative temperature is too low for meaningful production of major crops, and thus the region contributes minimally to the nation's total arable land.

As in much of the world, China's agricultural production is closely linked to available water: irrigated land accounts for 75% of the country's grain production,<sup>11</sup> and irrigation accounts for more than 60% of the country's total water consumption.<sup>12</sup> Water supply is one of the major factors limiting the extent of arable land, and yearly agricultural production, in China.<sup>9</sup> In 2008, for example, drought stress affected nearly 10% of China's arable land (a total of 12 million hectares), with 812 000 hectares undergoing total crop failure.<sup>13</sup> Regionally, water scarcity is especially severe in northwest China, which comprises more than 40% of China's total land area. This area has undergone widespread desertification and thus contributes minimally to the country's overall agricultural output.<sup>14</sup> Nationally, per-person freshwater resources in China are far below the global average (figure 1B), and supplies are further diminished by widespread water pollution.<sup>15</sup>

Compounding the productivity limits imposed by insufficient land and inadequate water supplies, intensive farming of productive land has led to deficiencies in soil micronutrients that impede agricultural productivity in China.<sup>16</sup> The distribution of micronutrients in soil differs substantially by region,<sup>16</sup> and for zinc and iron, for instance, the bioavailable quantity rather than the absolute quantity defines the micronutrient quality of the soil. In acid soils found in southern China, iron and zinc are more chemically available for uptake by plants than in calcareous soils typically found in northern China.<sup>16</sup>

Deficiencies of some micronutrients in soil can be passed along to crops, contributing in some cases to dietary micronutrient deficits.<sup>17</sup> Such a pathway from soil micronutrient deficiency to malnutrition from food micronutrient deficiency is rare, although evidence from China of such a pathway for iodine has been reported.<sup>17</sup> Much more often, human populations, such as those living in remote regions and with low incomes, cannot readily access diverse food types, leading to dietary micronutrient deficiency, which poses major threats to public health<sup>18</sup> and the economy<sup>19</sup> in China. In a 2002 survey, an estimated 208 million Chinese people, mainly in rural areas, had iron-deficiency anaemia and 86 million had zinc-deficiency stunting.<sup>18</sup> The problem of malnutrition still persists in some very poor populations,<sup>19</sup> despite the rapid overall economic growth in China. Diversification of diets, and when appropriate, fortification of food products, are important to address this serious issue.<sup>18</sup> Additional research on biofortification, which aims to help the accumulation of micro-nutrients inside edible plant parts with classic breeding and transgenic technologies, might constitute new directions in this arena.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the many challenges that have faced agricultural productivity in China, particularly those from the late 1950s to the late 1960s (appendix), the gap has closed between the global average and Chinese average per-person production of cereals—the major source of calories in the Chinese diet (figure 1C). Many factors have contributed to rising per-person production, including successful breeding programmes of high-yield varieties of cereal, heterotic grains (eg, hybrid rice), and increasing agricultural inputs (eg, with agrochemicals and energy for farm machinery and production of agrochemicals).<sup>21–23</sup> Sustaining these gains while limiting environmental degradation from overuse of agrochemicals and other inputs is a major challenge facing China, particularly as the Chinese diet shifts towards greater consumption of animal products, edible oils, and processed foods.

China has seen dramatic dietary shifts throughout the past five decades, including a rapid increase in the consumption of animal products such as meat, milk, and eggs (figure 2A).

Indeed, the nutritional transition has been well documented in China,<sup>24</sup> involving a switch from a semivegetarian diet to an animal-product-dominant diet. A coincident rapid increase in the overweight population, particularly in Chinese cities, threatens to impose major public health effects from associated metabolic syndromes and diet-related diseases,<sup>24,25</sup> following trends in other industrialised countries.

Furthermore, rising demand for animal products increases the need for animal feed, potentially requiring China to import food crops to supply its massive domestic animal agriculture sector.<sup>26</sup> Such an effect has already been noted within China's domestic agricultural market: acreage of maize production has increased rapidly when compared with the relatively steady acreage devoted to rice and wheat (appendix). The largest use of China's maize crop is as animal feed, and consumption has doubled since the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> To protect its supply of animal feed, the Chinese Government is contemplating measures to restrict the industrial use of maize—eg, for the production of starch, sweeteners, and ethyl alcohol.<sup>28</sup>

The country's rapid increase in its production of fishery products has eased the pressures on China's land-based animal agriculture somewhat (figure 2B). Most of the increase throughout the past decade is a result of the expansion of freshwater fish farming, which is expected to continue despite the serious environmental effects on freshwater resources.<sup>29,30</sup> Since China has an extensive coastline, increases are also expected in the catch from marine fisheries. Sustainable fish farming and marine fish harvesting, along with the protection of endangered marine species, will be key issues for these industries in the future.

## Strategies to safeguard food supply in China

Food is an integral part of Chinese culture (appendix), and as suggested by the Chinese saying “To people, food is heaven”, food supply issues have been at the foundation of social stability in China. The challenges to food supply in China discussed so far are compounded not only by China's exceptionally large population, but also by rising inequalities. More than 13% of the Chinese population lives below the poverty line (yearly income below US \$363), with most of the poor residing in rural areas.<sup>31</sup> Undernutrition, particularly in children in under developed remote regions, is estimated to cost China 4% of its gross domestic product (GDP) every year.<sup>19</sup> And although the Chinese Government has for decades focused on keeping the price of agricultural products low,<sup>32</sup> these policies have particularly benefited populations in cities while limiting economic incentives for farming in rural areas and thus imposing negative feedbacks with respect to agricultural productivity.

These trends will be partly mitigated by China's unprecedented population migration, a continuing process that is fundamentally reshaping rural and urban populations alike.<sup>10</sup> More than half of the population now resides in urban areas—compared with less than 20% in 1980<sup>33</sup>—and the population remaining in rural areas has tended to have more land per person since 1980 onwards. The mechanisation and industrialisation of agriculture, which have accompanied larger farm sizes, can push up rural incomes and agricultural productivity,<sup>34</sup> and can also have unique effects on public health by, for instance, modifying transmission path ways of environmental pathogens such as the parasitic helminth that causes schistosomiasis.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, rapid urbanisation has several public health effects that have been comprehensively reviewed elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> including important effects of changing diet that accompany rural-to-urban migration and put pressure on food supplies as consumption of animal products increases.

In view of the importance of freshwater resources to Chinese agricultural productivity, described above, water conservation and engineering projects clearly have a part to play in addressing food supply issues, particularly in water-scarce northern China. The massive

South–North Water Transfer Project<sup>36</sup> aims to redistribute freshwater resources to alleviate regional disparities in supply, but projects like this one should be accompanied by increased efficiency measures, including water-saving agricultural practices such as drip irrigation and cover crops, which have been implemented in several regions in northwest China.

China is making other major investments in agricultural technologies aimed at key products, such as the substantial US\$3.5 billion set aside to support research on transgenic varieties of rice, wheat, maize, soybean, cotton and three important domestic animals (pigs, cows, and sheep).<sup>37</sup> Use of genetically-modified (GM) technologies, and GM food and non-food agricultural products, are regarded as important means to provide for the country's future food demand. The Chinese Ministry of Agriculture has adopted guidelines based on the concept of substantial equivalence, which limits testing requirements to key product characteristics.<sup>38,39</sup> A case-by-case approach is used to assess GM food safety with the non-GM counterpart as the reference, examining the toxicology of, and allergenic response to, new proteins, key component analysis, animal feeding tests, nutrition assessments, and the effects of processing of the GM product.<sup>38,39</sup> The future market of GM products in China will depend on maintenance of Chinese consumers' confidence, which in turn will rely on enforcement of appropriate regulatory measures put in place by the government.

### Shifting concerns from food supply to food safety in China

The rapidly growing Chinese economy has led to a gradual change in focus from food supply to food safety. China's GDP reached \$7.3 trillion in 2011, accounting for 11.8% of the global economy. Living standards have thus risen across the Chinese population—per-person income has increased by nine times from 1990 to 2008<sup>40</sup>—with important effects on food and diet. China's Engel's coefficient, which measures the proportion of income spent on food, has improved from 57.5% (urban) and 67.7% (rural) in 1978 to 36.3% (urban) and 40.4% (rural) in 2011 (appendix).<sup>41</sup> However, this value is still behind industrialised countries such as South Korea—eg, in 2012, South Korea's Engel's coefficient of the high-income and low-income quintiles were 11.6% and 20.8%, respectively.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, perception of food in China has undergone a fundamental change. In addition to fulfilling basic survival needs, food is now widely perceived as an ordinary commercial commodity for profit making, and thus several incidents of illegal activities have occurred, in pursuit of increased margins, by food producers and manufacturers that have jeopardised the public's trust in food safety. In a 2011 survey, food safety was ranked first in the top five safety issues that worried the Chinese population, surpassing public safety, traffic safety, health safety, and environmental safety.<sup>43</sup>

### Foodborne disease and food safety issues in China

Food safety—the assurance that food will not cause harm to the consumer when it is prepared and consumed according to its intended use<sup>44</sup>—is a global issue that affects the health of populations in both industrialised and developing countries.<sup>45</sup> In fact, in some industrialised countries, the proportion of the population with food borne diseases is estimated to be up to 30% every year,<sup>46</sup> and major outbreaks of food safety problems persist—eg, the contamination of ground turkey by *Salmonella enterica* serotype Heidelberg in the USA<sup>47</sup> and the contamination of sprouts by *Escherichia coli* O104 in Europe.<sup>48</sup>

In China, fewer than 20 000 major food poisoning incidents a year were officially reported in the past ten years.<sup>49</sup> In 2012, for example, 6685 incidents were reported, with most attributable to microbial agents (56.1%), followed by toxic animals or plants (14.8%), and chemical contamination (5.9%).<sup>50</sup> As with reporting of most food safety issues globally, under-reporting is common and the number of incidents is surely much higher,<sup>51,52</sup>

especially since the reported number of incidents is fewer than that reported in highly industrialised countries such as the USA.<sup>53</sup> Some civilian efforts to establish databases for food-safety related news exist,<sup>54</sup> in part in response to the rising visibility of food safety issues in China. Contributing to this rise is the concern about the public health effects associated with food safety incidents in China's very large domestic population, and the nation's emergence as a major exporter to global food markets.

The food production process provides many opportunities for contamination at various stages (figure 3). During primary production, improper use of agrochemicals, fertilisers, and pesticides in the field, and antibiotics and antiparasitic agents in animal agriculture, might lead to the presence of unsafe compounds in food products. Meanwhile, suboptimal storage and transportation might lead to contamination by harmful microorganisms and associated toxins. Use of unlawful additives in food processing can further contaminate food products.<sup>55,56</sup> Since water is essential to food production, preparation, and processing, a major source of foodborne disease in China stems from the shortage of clean water and poor sanitation. In 1988, 292 301 cases of hepatitis A were reported in Shanghai, due to the consumption of raw clams harvested from areas contaminated with untreated sewage.<sup>57</sup> China is not alone in having outbreaks associated with contaminated water used in food production—outbreaks of *E coli* O157 in Sweden in 2005 linked to contaminated irrigation water,<sup>58</sup> and a viral gastroenteritis outbreak in the UK in 1994 associated with contaminated water used in food processing, are important examples from industrialised countries.<sup>59</sup> However, China's water and sanitation infrastructure is at a much earlier stage of development,<sup>60</sup> and thus the risks to the food supply are much greater. In rural areas—the setting where most food production occurs—an estimated third of the population does not have access to improved sanitation, contributing, for instance, to the continuing transmission of important foodborne diseases such as trematodiasis.<sup>60–62</sup>

Meanwhile, chemical pollution is a major threat to both agricultural land and freshwater supplies.<sup>15</sup> The rapid development of industrial facilities in rural areas, often immediately adjacent to agricultural land, is an escalating food safety problem because fields are being contaminated by industrial wastes such as heavy metals. For instance, soil and water contamination with the heavy metal cadmium can lead to the presence of this toxicant in agricultural products that, when consumed, poses a range of health risks, from renal failure to osteoporosis to increased risk of some cancers.<sup>63</sup> Fatal cases of cadmium exposure, through food and environmental routes, have been reported in China,<sup>64</sup> and in 2007, results of a survey by Nanjing Agricultural University showed that 10% of rice samples collected from six agricultural regions were tainted with the metal.<sup>65</sup> A follow-up investigation in 2008 of rice samples collected from markets in southern China showed that the level of cadmium exceeded the state food security standards in 70% of the samples tested.<sup>66</sup> Another investigation in the coastal region of the Fujian province showed that more than 16% of rice samples exceeded the safety levels for lead, and more than 11% exceeded the levels for cadmium.<sup>67</sup>

Such focused investigations might not be representative, however, and severe heavy metal contamination might be restricted to some key industrial regions in the country.<sup>68</sup> Consistent with this possibility, an analysis of lead exposure, using data from the latest China Total Diet Study done by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control,<sup>69</sup> revealed that although the median values of dietary lead exposure—mainly from cereals and vegetables—was lower in 2007 than in 2000, the level of dietary lead exposure in the highest group (97.5 per centile) in 2007 had increased tremendously,<sup>69</sup> suggesting that particular regions might be heavily contaminated. A comparison of the margin of exposure values suggests that people in China have a significantly higher risk of dietary lead exposure than do those in Australia, with children aged 2–7 years comprising the highest-risk group.<sup>69</sup> These reports call for greater

attention to, and better monitoring of, the potential food safety hazards brought forth by industrial wastes.

In the context of agricultural production itself, overuse and misuse of certain agrochemicals pose another set of major concerns for public health and food safety in China. Fertiliser overuse, for instance, is widely acknowledged in China<sup>21</sup> and is associated with algal blooms in lakes and reservoirs that contaminate drinking water with toxic microcystins, leading to diarrhoea, liver cancers, and other outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, China has now become the largest pesticide producer and exporter in the world,<sup>23</sup> and excessive application of pesticides can lead to unsafe residues in food products; indeed, severe poisoning incidents have been reported in China.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, veterinary drug residues in animal products are a major concern in China,<sup>70</sup> as is overuse of antibiotics added to animal feeds,<sup>71</sup> which poses hazards to global health far beyond China's borders.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, the addition of illegal additives is a prominent food safety problem with a particularly difficult recent history in China's food sector. Incidents of illegal chemical additives in foodstuffs have occurred recurrently (table 1), leading to public health hazards, social distrust of the food industry, and loss of public confidence in the regulatory system. In view of the many threats to food safety in the country, the Chinese Government is rapidly implementing plans to monitor food safety. Several systems have come online, including the Animal Labelling and Disease Traceability System, the National Monitoring and Control Plan on Animal Drug Residues in Animals and Animal Products, and the Surveillance Plan on Drug Resistance of Animal-Origin Bacteria.<sup>70</sup>

## Legislation versus implementation

Safeguarding global food safety requires the establishment of international laws on food safety according to a set of mutually agreed principles, which should then be actualised via country-specific legislation. The Chinese Government has made tremendous efforts to reform food safety laws as part of a long evolving process.<sup>77</sup> The milestones of China's legislation related to food safety in China are summarised in table 2. In brief, food safety in China was first conceptualised, and legislated, as a food hygiene issue. To provide clearer guidelines for compliance, laws seeking standardisation were introduced, and these guidelines were more recently harmonised with international standards to better link compliance in China to the needs of global food product markets. This process culminated in the comprehensive Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China, adopted in 2009, but even before this act, the Chinese Government had established many standards for the food industry, including those that involved the inspection of imported and exported food products.<sup>77</sup> China has also adopted the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (also known as the SPS Agreement), a treaty of the World Trade Organisation that is based on recommendations of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex).<sup>44</sup>

Yet although food safety legislation is far reaching in China, the implementation of food safety laws is very difficult. One key challenge is that China has a broad administrative structure, and the regulatory control of food safety is a shared responsibility among national, provincial, and local government authorities. A clear chain of command and responsibilities, a set of common and consistent standards, and a well coordinated central steering committee would strengthen China's implementation of existing food safety statutes.<sup>55</sup> To improve coordination among different regulatory bodies, China established the State Council Leading Group on Product Quality and Food Safety in 2007, and following the 2009 Food Safety Law, the State Council Food Security Committee was established, composed of several high-ranking officials, and the roles of different ministries and administrations were

specified. In 2013, at the first meeting of the 12th National People's Congress, lawmakers established a new China Food and Drug Administration, which will serve as a centralised authority, replacing the functions of other regulatory bodies. This major overhaul signifies China's determination to build a high-level, unified system to handle food safety issues.

Recent progress on food safety legislation and regulation, however, has been limited by the huge scale of China's food industry, which makes it difficult to uphold high safety standards across the vast diversity of food products. As is the case with other large developing countries such as India,<sup>56</sup> China's regulatory approaches are complicated by the sheer size of the food sector: more than 450 000 food production and processing companies are active in China, 350 000 of which are small enterprises with fewer than ten employees.<sup>55</sup> For these small food companies, the wide array of required safety tests can be a significant burden, particularly in the absence of inexpensive and standardised testing protocols. One important way forward is to provide assistance and training to these small enterprises, particularly by teaming them with private sector developers of standardised food safety tests. With support from regulators, these developers might play a part in training food industry personnel to comply with government standards, while providing safety tests and certifications for the wide range of food products covered.

As with any commercial commodity, maximising profits and seeking quick returns might at times supersede social responsibility. In the worst scenarios, criminal acts and corruption have influenced food safety. This scenario was emphasised in the 2012 work report of China's Supreme People's Court, which documented the 320 people that were convicted for food safety crimes in 2011. The actual number of cases under investigation is expected to be much higher. Nonetheless, such prosecutions show the high priority of food-safety related crimes in law enforcement in China.

## Moving from endpoint controls to risk-based food safety control systems

Industrialised countries faced several serious food safety crises in the 1990s, prompting their governments to undertake comprehensive reviews of their food safety policies. In brief, the laws regulating food safety before the 1990s were mainly in the form of command and control, whereas newly evolved food safety policies placed more emphases on risk analysis and cost-benefit analysis by governments, and quality management by industries.<sup>78</sup> The concepts of hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) have gradually gained acceptance, shifting the primary means of achieving food safety to the prevention of hazards, rather than inspection of the final products.<sup>79</sup>

Since it might be more cost effective to use auditing as an inspection method rather than placing excessive emphasis on end-product testing, the UN has recommended that China adopt the HACCP system as national food safety policy, and introduce good practices in all food sectors (eg, Good Agricultural Practices, Good Veterinary Practices, Good Aquaculture Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices, and Good Hygiene Practices).<sup>55</sup>

Substantial progress has been made along these lines. The 2009 Food Safety Law Implementation Rules provide evidence that China is adopting many of these suggestions into its national food safety laws. Rules that cover food manufacture and trade now require food manufacturers and distributors to document and arrange training for employees, establish incoming product and food shipment inspection and recording systems, and implement a range of food safety management systems. These requirements conform to HACCP, and China started to implement the global standard (GB22000-2006 or ISO 22000) in 2007, which includes standards from both HACCP and Good Manufacturing Practice.



The China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment was established in 2011, and will coordinate the national efforts to monitor chemical and hazard factors, foodborne pathogens, and foodborne disease according to the principles set forth in the Rules for Monitoring Food Safety Risk (Provisional) released in 2010. Implementation details and working reports are released to the public through the centre's webpage.

## **The future of food safety in China: responsibility, accountability, and trackability**

Although food safety in China involves a range of complicated, multidimensional issues, several high priority items were identified by this Review: establishment of a tracking system so that weak links in protection of food safety can be readily identified; building of a regulatory system with a clear chain of command and division of labour among different regulatory bodies; adoption of common safety standards for all regulatory bodies; and advancement of technologies to enable rapid and accurate measurement of food safety indicators.

The Chinese Government has committed to implementing effective and timely measures to address food safety problems, through improvements in food safety monitoring and surveillance, and by strengthening legislative mandates. During the 11th Five-Year Plan period (2006–10), the Chinese Government earmarked a total of CN¥5.51 billion (about \$88.5 million) to support the establishment of regulatory systems and strengthen enforcement of food safety monitoring. Recently, the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–15) was issued, which included a national plan for food safety regulation systems that provides a detailed blueprint for a unified set of national food safety standards, an optimised, science-based food safety regulatory mechanism, and a plan for implementing food safety regulations.<sup>80</sup>

The 2009 Food Safety Law marked a historic turning point in food safety policy in China, with adoption of key international standards and a range of new and innovative policy mechanisms unique to China. The aforementioned China Food and Drug Administration is an essential first step to providing a centrally coordinated authority to regulate food safety. However, assurance of food safety and rebuilding of public trust will need food industries in China to recognise that they are ultimately responsible, and will be held accountable, for food safety problems, even though the government is responsible for legislation and enforcement of regulations. Technological advances such as rapid screening methods might help China's vast food industries to identify and manage risks at an early stage. But perhaps even more importantly, social responsibility should be adopted as an overarching principle governing the actions of food industries, placing food safety ahead of maximisation of profits. To raise accountability, a tracking system should be implemented to locate the origin of problems, and the strengthening of surveillance systems and improvement in enforcement of food safety laws will be the key to success. Increasing awareness of the public, and improving transparency via media reporting, should be encouraged to increase the engagement of the public in discussions about, and implementation of, food safety measures.

In view of the scale, diversity, and complexity of China's food production, processing, and distribution systems, no quick fixes exist to resolve the country's food supply and safety challenges. Through the combination of innovative legislative and regulatory actions, public engagement, and renewed commitments by industries to uphold principles of environmental sustainability and consumer protection, we cautiously anticipate gradual improvements in coming years.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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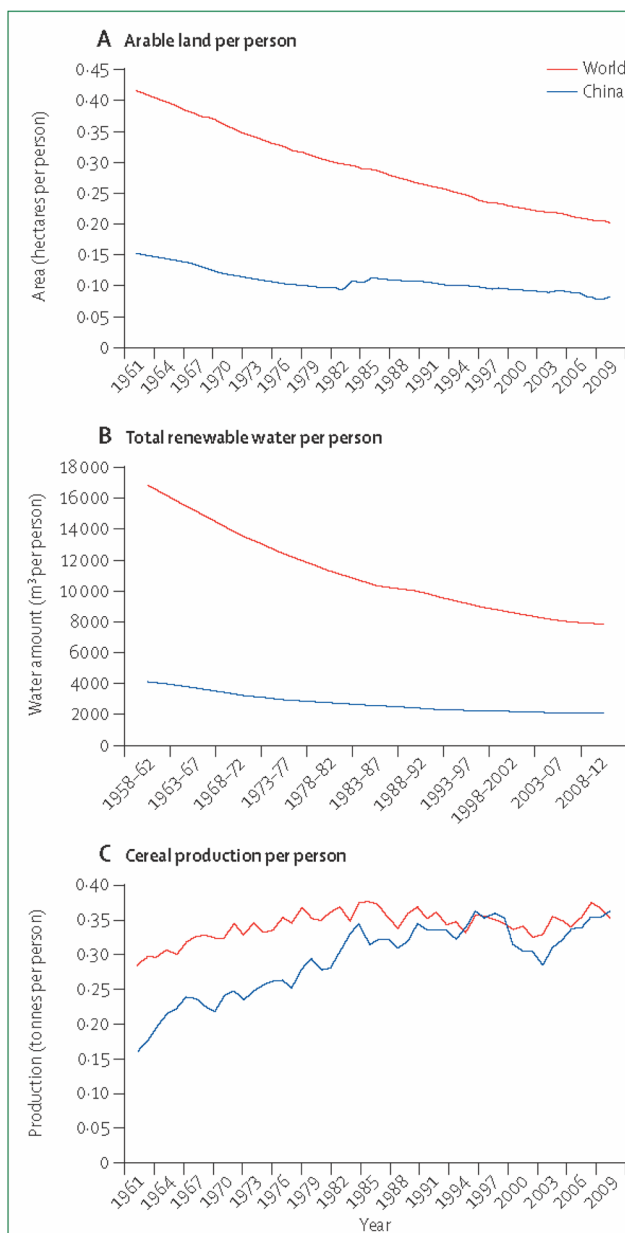
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### Search strategy and selection criteria

We searched published scientific literature, official websites, and news websites from international and Chinese sources (in both English and Chinese) with the key words “food security”, “food safety”, “foodborne disease”, “food consumption”, and “diet”, combined with the term “China”. We drew statistical data mainly from public databases hosted by Chinese Government agencies and by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. We compared, analysed, and summarised the evidence drawn from the scientific literature, official and media sources, and related databases.

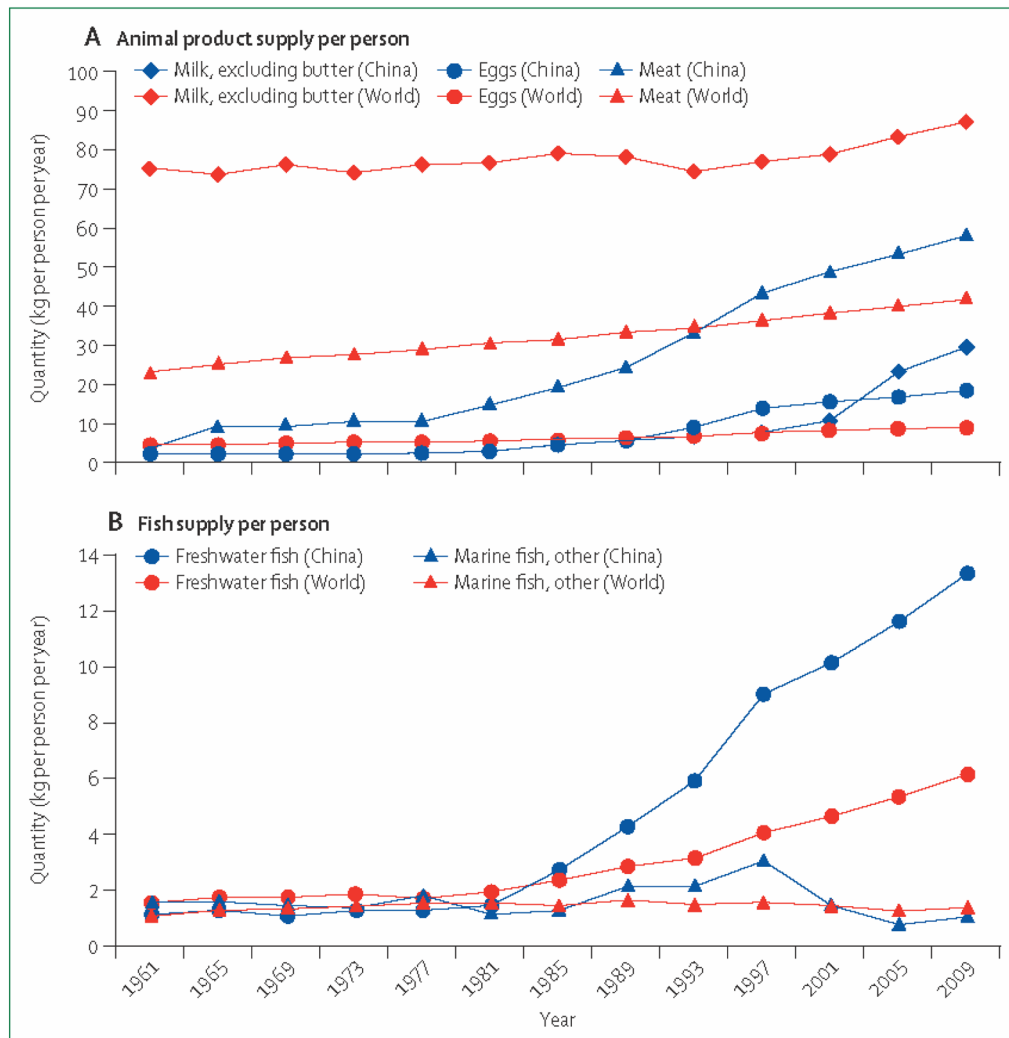
### Key messages

- Major food supply issues in China might be exacerbated by the rapidly rising demand for animal feed, which is associated with the country's transition towards greater consumption of animal products; despite recent progress, undernutrition is still reported in children living in remote regions
- A gradual shift in focus from food supply to food safety has occurred in China, and public engagement in food issues has increased in recent years
- Although most food safety incidents are related to microorganisms, toxic plants and animals, and chemical contamination, illegal food additives and contamination with environmental hazards are growing problems in China
- The Chinese Government has shown a strong commitment to reforming food safety laws and strengthening vital surveillance and monitoring systems, yet weak links remain, particularly in implementation

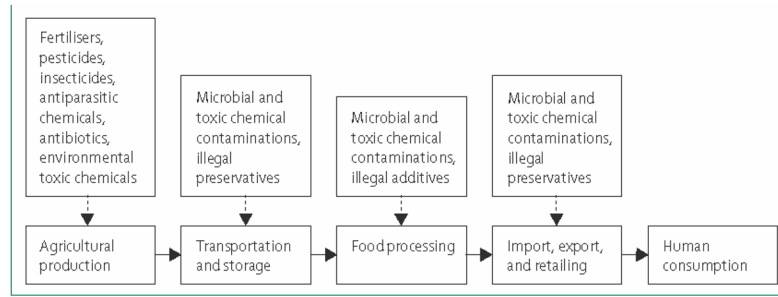


**Figure 1.** Temporal trends in land use, water resources, and cereal production, worldwide and in China. Total arable land (A), renewable water resources (B), and cereal production (C) were divided by the total populations of the world and China, respectively. Data are from the UN Food and Agricultural Organization.<sup>8</sup>





**Figure 2.** Temporal trends in supply of animal and fish products, worldwide and in China. Masses of yearly animal food product production (A) or fish harvest (B) were divided by the total populations of the world and China, respectively. Data are from the UN Food and Agricultural Organization.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3.**  
Possible sources of contamination in the food supply chain

**Table 1**

Selected incidents of illegal chemical food additives in China that were extensively covered by the media

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Details</b>
Ractopamine	2011	Ractopamine is a $\beta$ -adrenoceptor agonist. Although it is allowed to be used to promote leanness of meat in some countries, such as the USA, high doses of ractopamine might have harmful side-effects. Ractopamine was reported to have caused an outbreak of food poisoning in 2001, and was subsequently prohibited in animal husbandry in 2002 and stopped from being imported into China in 2009. After discovering the use of ractopamine in pig rearing in Henan province in 2009, the government launched an extensive investigation to remove ractopamine from animal feed. In 2011, a new law was passed to ban the sale and manufacturing of ractopamine in China. <sup>73</sup>
Ditch oil	2011	Ditch oil is produced by recycling waste oil from hotel and restaurant drainage pipes for human consumption, which is believed to be a widespread illegal activity. For example, in 2011, joint action by detectives from Zhejiang, Shandong, and Henan provinces successfully tracked down a criminal network that sold ditch oil to restaurants. 60 000 tons of ditch oil were recovered. <sup>74</sup>
Melamine	2008	In 2004, a severe incident involving fake formula milk that did not contain sufficient amounts of protein was reported in China. Babies affected by malnutrition as a result of consuming the milk were noted as having abnormally large heads in comparison with their malnourished bodies, and some sustained permanent damage. Since then, the government has implemented a stringent standard for the protein content of milk (by measuring total nitrogen content). In 2008, criminals invented a new way to fake the detection of protein by adding melamine to milk and infant formula. Melamine caused the formation of kidney stones in babies, resulting in several hundreds of hospital admissions and a few fatalities. <sup>75</sup>
Sudan IV	2006	Due to its potential carcinogenic effects, the dye Sudan IV has been banned from use in food colouring. In 2006, the Chinese General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine announced that Sudan IV had been detected in the eggs of poultry. Some farms had illegally added Sudan IV to poultry feed to stain the egg yolk with an attractive red colour. <sup>76</sup>

**Table 2**

## Milestones of legislation related to food safety in China

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<b>Major content</b>	
1965	The overall concept of food safety was first raised in the Provisional Food Hygiene Ordinance
1979	The 1965 regulation was formalised as the Food Hygiene Ordinance of the People's Republic of China, a first attempt to introduce the concept of standardisation of food hygiene
1988	The Standardisation Law of the People's Republic of China was implemented
1995	A comprehensive revision of the Food Hygiene Ordinance led to the announcement of the Food Hygiene Law of the People's Republic of China
2006	The new Agricultural Product Quality Safety Law of the People's Republic of China was issued to specifically regulate agricultural products
2009	To harmonise Chinese law with international standards, the comprehensive Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China was adopted, and was accompanied by the Implementation Rules of Food Safety Law

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