

# Public accountability in public health in China

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# Valorisation of research insights

## 1. Valorisation

China's public health governance has put experts and their technical rationality in an authoritative position to promote institutional efficiency since China's economic reform in the 1970s. The high reliance on technical rationality inevitably results in insufficient attention on lay expertise and the alignment with political goals causes the less attunement to public benefits and demands in public health governance. Meanwhile, the persistent public health crises over the last few decades have solidified the gap between risk perceptions of experts and citizens, and the lack of responsiveness and participation in the public health governance system has fuelled public distrust in the modern society of China. This study inquired into diverse Chinese stakeholders in food and vaccine safety governance to understand how expert and lay knowledge are related to public accountability of public health. In this valorisation chapter, I will show the social relevance, values and practical recommendations of this study to academia and societal actors, and I will point to the value of this study for studying the COVID-19 crisis management in China and for future public health governance.

## 2. The value of this study for academia

### *2.1 The importance of a multiple stakeholder perspectives in study designs*

Chinese academics tend to interview single stakeholders, such as experts, public officials or citizens, privileging a particular style of evidence when presenting knowledge regarding food and vaccine safety governance (Yan, 2010; Hu, 2018). However, Miles (2017) criticises this, saying that single stakeholder perspectives breed partial knowledge and engender epistemic injustice. My study shows that, for instance, interviews with governmental actors will not present as accurate a view because, constrained by political forces, governmental actors often dare not express their true opinions and experiences. Therefore, it is important to interview diverse stakeholders.

Why are diverse stakeholder perspectives important to academic research? Paphitis (2018) argues that doing research with diverse stakeholder perspectives is related to systematic knowledge production as well as epistemic justice. According to Fricker (2007) and Felt (2017), it is important to ask who has a voice to make legitimate knowledge claims, who defines what matters, and who participates in imagining and shaping the future. Asking these *who* questions points to concerns not only about actors and identity but also exclusion, inequality and social injustice. Scholars who focus

on single stakeholders implicitly assign a lower level of credibility to other stakeholders' testimony or report. Aware of that, this study thereby engaged with diverse stakeholders, aiming to present a broader perspective on public health governance and offer a methodological example of a qualitative study in China. Furthermore, in chapter 5, I examined special experiences and arguments of online self-proclaimed vaccination victims regarding vaccine safety and vaccination governance: they represented a dissenting voice that had been suppressed by the state to maintain a high vaccination rate across the country, and this position is rarely reflected in Chinese academia. Understanding different stakeholders' narratives will help to construct a robust food and vaccine governance system in China, so future studies should pay more attention to groups like vaccination victims whose knowledge, experience and attitude are underrepresented by academia.

## *2.2 The importance of studying inclusive governance in China*

Influenced by the political environment, there is an overwhelming majority in Chinese academia that studies the role of technical rationality in public health governance to promote institutional efficiency aimed at ensuring food and drug safety and public trust. As a consequence, less research deals with the construction of inclusive governance systems in the quasi-authoritarian regime of China. An inclusive governance system entails a participatory turn established in the food and vaccine safety governance system to allow diverse stakeholders to disclose information, negotiate and discuss decision-making processes to attune to the various demands of societal actors.

Jeffrey and Sigley (2009) argue that an inclusive governance system is important not only in Western contexts but also in the quasi-authoritarian context of China to attune to public interest and to adapt the Chinese bureaucratic system to modern society. In line with that, this study shows that public mistrust in the governance of food and vaccine safety in China flows not only from regulatory deficits and lack of efficiency but also from insufficient information transparency and lack of public participation in the food and drug safety governance system. Despite the fact that the deployment of technical instruments has improved the operational efficiency of bureaucratic systems in China, the unresponsiveness and non-participatory nature of the Chinese bureaucratic system has decreased public trust and failed to attune to public demands. Consequently, the wider public has expressed their dissatisfaction and distrust on social media.

As my thesis shows, many respondents would favour a Chinese governance system that is more responsive and inclusive and aims to increase the credibility and legitimacy of the bureaucratic system in China. In spite of the establishment of a public complaint system by the state to engage the public in monitoring risks in food and safety and to improve the responsiveness of the bureaucratic system to public demands, my study shows that the public is unlikely to genuinely become engaged. Social organisations with less authority and regulatory resources are not acknowledged as serious

partners in Chinese food and drug safety governance. Additionally, as a high threshold is set by the state and technical experts, laypeople are unable to engage in the risk assessment and process of decision-making pertaining to food and vaccine safety governance. For fear of expert authority being eroded, symmetrical science communication between experts and the public has not been developed. My study suggests that, as a response to that situation, the public designates specific public experts to engage in decision-making to challenge experts that are affiliated with state institutions, to protect public interests. My study indicates that more studies about the collaboration between experts and laypeople in public health governance can be conducted in Chinese academia to remedy these deficits.

### *2.3 Importance of adapting methods and ethics to the Chinese context*

China, as it rapidly transitions from a pre-industrial to a largely industrial and, in certain aspects, even post-industrial state, provides a fascinating window to processes of rapid modernisation, in which increasing social issues, such as public health scandals and trust crises, stimulate widespread concern in academia. As such, it is important to utilise Chinese academic databases and do fieldwork in China to study these social issues. This study suggests that literature research is important to be careful to use terminology extracted from Western academic discussions to search resources in Chinese academic databases. This study affords a lesson for doing fieldwork in China as well. In general, academia expects standard procedures to invite people to participate and to organise informed consent. However, performing a qualitative study in China, including fieldwork and interviews, is complicated. In practice, affected by a sensitive political environment and low social trust, getting access to potential participants via standard procedures is not feasible in China (Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006). Local officials are reluctant to participate in field investigations for fear of negative reports, damage to their reputations, and subsequent administrative accountability. Chinese citizens also generally distrust interviews conducted by strangers, and they are reluctant to openly express personal opinions. In this study, I adopted informal ways, such as *gift-giving* and *acquaintances as mediators to establish first contact*, of establishing a private, trusting relationship with potential participants. Therefore, this study suggests that organising access to respondents by establishing personal relationships could be an option to conduct fieldwork in China when formal ways fail to work.

## **3. Impact on societal actors in China**

### *3.1. The importance of balancing expert and lay knowledge in public health governance*

In China the role of scientific experts to promote institutional efficiency results in large public distrust of public health governance. This study suggests that the involvement of laypeople's experiential knowledge of food and vaccine safety governance may be beneficial for public trust, risk monitoring

and attuning to public interest. To facilitate public participation and balance expert and lay knowledge in Chinese public health governance practices, this study suggests that the development of more symmetrical science communications and interactions between experts and laypeople would be fruitful. Chapter 5 suggested that laypeople delegate their own experts' mediators to contest technical public health expertise and to reach a compromise with experts. This could be an important step in this process.

### *3.2 Reducing public alienation of experts*

Food and vaccine scandals over the last decade have demonstrated different risk perceptions of food and vaccine safety between experts and public, resulting in part of the public becoming suspicious of expert knowledge. Experts who were working in public institutions were salaried by the state, aligned with political goals which decreased their public credibility. Technical experts were seen as not considering the public interest, as perceiving laypeople as naive and ignorant and as excluding the involvement of lay knowledge. My analysis of stakeholders' perspectives suggests that to mitigate public alienation, an independent expert risk assessment committee on food and vaccination governance should be established to professionally assess risks without political intervention. This study also suggests that experts should cultivate their social responsibility awareness, and their research should be accountable to citizens as their research funding comes from taxpayers. Chapter 5 suggested that experts should engage in public events regarding vaccine safety governance to communicate with the public on a basis of equality and respect. The state should reduce its intervention in science communication so that science can freely attune to public interests and values.

### *3.3 Empowering social organisations in China*

In China several NGOs are active Chinese charity organisations but some are organisations like the Red Cross. Because most of these organisations have little capacity and regulatory resources, they are unable to effectively engage in public health governance in the quasi-authoritarian context of China. This study suggests that NGOs should empower themselves by obtaining funding and other resources through market competition and society support, rather than by relying on the state. To gain public trust, non-expert entities should keep their operations transparent as well.

## **4. Impact on future public health governance**

### *4.1 Managing the COVID-19 crisis and public trust in China*

This thesis studied public accountability of public health governance in China through food and vaccine scandals, and the theoretical perspective that I used provides a lens for understanding China's

the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis and the management of public (dis)trust management as well. During COVID-19 in China, the crisis response of the state, such as reprimanding informants who disclosed information about coronavirus online without state permission and lack of information transparency and public participation, incited public panic, anger and distrust, and citizens were roaring on social media to hold Wuhan state and China's public health governance system accountable. Against this background, it is important to understand how public accountability and public distrust during the COVID-19 pandemic are portrayed as public issues and how they are debated by Chinese stakeholders.

According to Yang (2020), a large numbers of citizens have shown their distrust on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, and this public distrust was rooted in the alignment of experts with political goals, neglecting public interest and demands. In particular, CDC experts have repeatedly announced the low mortality of coronavirus and limited information transparency to pacify citizens and maintain social stability. CDC experts have strived to persuade citizens to trust in science unconditionally, referring to what the state and experts have accomplished for the benefits of the masses. Moreover, CDC experts were not actively involved in frontline crisis management but competitively published articles related to the coronavirus crisis for scientific prestige, inciting public anger on social media and demanding unreliable CDC experts be held accountable.

Studying public accountability and public trust during the coronavirus crisis in China from the perspective I developed in my thesis will stimulate Chinese academia to explore how a more participatory governance system may respond to the rising public distrust during the COVID-19 crisis. Meanwhile, investigating public distrust and demands of COVID-19 crisis response in China will foreground the critical role of NGOs and identify the deficiencies in their operations during the Covid-19 crisis in China as well. For instance, NGOs built an online platform to disclose information about coronavirus crisis management promptly, facilitating information transparency and social trust. However, NGOs that received social donations failed to ensure financial transparency, leading to public questions. As such, constructing public trust in NGOs will boost their credibility in the public.

To investigate public distrust and accountability during COVID-19 crisis management in China, data on social media platforms, such as Sina Weibo, Zhihu and WeChat communities, can be collected to analyse the characteristics and content of public distrust. Due to isolation at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became the mainstream tool for people to interact with others. Unlike traditional online communication tools, mobile social media have the characteristics of decentralised communication structure, real-time broadcasting and public participation. It is fundamentally different from the traditional media environment, and the hotspots on mobile social media switch fast and suddenly. If governments and social organisations understand social media debates and responses, they can take measures to alleviate public distrust effectively (Hoffman et al.,

2019; Zhou et al., 2019). To analyse these online data, big data analytic software, such as Prism 8 or Gephi 8.2, could be utilised to chart the changes in public concern on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in China and to generate visualisation of the contents of public distrust. Subsequently, a qualitative study could be conducted to interview diverse stakeholders, such as clinicians, local officials, citizens, journalists and CDC experts in China, to understand different perspectives regarding management of the COVID-19 crisis and public trust in China.

#### 4.2 A need for participatory governance systems at transnational levels

The increasing risks in the global food and vaccine supply chains not only require national authorities to reflect on their governance structures but also require transnational cooperation to ensure food and vaccine safety and to effectively deal with global public health crises. While national authorities need to address these issues, private enterprises and social organisations also need to set up criteria regarding food and vaccine safety governance, monitor risks, share information, trace unsafe products, manage crises and train personnel (Zach et al., 2012; Havinga and Berbruggen, 2017). For whatever may go wrong in one nation, food and vaccine safety is a global issue.

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