

WP 1: Food Safety in China

This work package examines the construction of food safety discourses in China following the infant formula scandal of 2008, a 'food scare' involving the contamination of milk with the chemical melamine. It analyses consumer perceptions and parental practices in relation to food safety and the dairy industry's attempt to restore consumer confidence after the 'food scare'.

Methods:

- The project employed a combination of methods including **content analysis** of media images and advertising texts, **focus groups** and **interviews**.
- The content of television advertisements for infant formula was analysed, comparing the advertising strategies employed by Chinese and foreign manufacturers before and after the infant formula scandal of 2008.
- Focus groups with parents and other carers were conducted in Chengdu (the provincial capital of Sichuan) to examine changes in parental perceptions and practices in relation to food safety, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the advertising campaigns in restoring consumer confidence.
- Interviews were also conducted with consultants of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Agriculture and marketing and sales representatives from the dairy industry to understand the challenges of devising food safety policies and implementing them in practice in China.



Findings:

- The infant formula scandal was precipitated by China's **rapid urbanization** and the growth of **middle-class consumption patterns** (with more emphasis on meat and dairy products) as well as by a lack of effective government regulation of the supply chain.
- Immediately after the scandal, parents switched to **more expensive imported brands** and came to rely on food supplies from **rural friends and relatives** to ensure food safety.
- These parental practices are situated in the context of **high rates of female labour-force participation** (with low levels of maternity leave) and heavy **reliance on grandparents** to provide childcare for new-born babies.
- While parental practices have adjusted since the infant formula scandal, a range of **food-related anxieties** persist.
- After the scandal, images of **science and nature** were closely juxtaposed in media messages about the quality and safety of infant formula.
- In the absence of independent medical advice and affordable medical treatment, infant formula companies are prone to make **ill-founded health claims** for their products and to employ **dubious promotional tactics**.
- Chinese consumers exhibit considerable **ambivalence** about the advertising of infant formula, reflecting significant anxiety about its quality and safety.
- Both parental practices and advertising strategies should be understood in terms of the wider context of childcare practices in China including the prevalent discourses of '**scientific motherhood**' and **medicalized childcare** which have accompanied China's recent neoliberal reforms.

Key Publications:

Gong, Q. and Jackson, P. (2012) Consuming Anxiety?: Parental Practices in China after the Infant Formula Scandal. *Food, Culture and Society*, in press.