

# Reconfiguring Accountability and Transparency in China's Dairy Industry

MEGAN TRACY

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, James Madison University (tracy2me@jmu.edu)



## THE PROBLEM

Following several high-profile food and product safety scandals in 2007, China's state and corporate actors implemented a number of interventions to improve food safety and security. The 2008 melamine adulteration of China's domestic dairy supply demonstrated that regulatory and quality management issues had not been overcome. Government and corporate actors' attempts to suppress information about the scandal highlighted persistent concerns about transparency and accountability. Despite further restructuring of the food safety system, global consumers continue to worry about the China's food safety, security and quality.

## OBJECTIVES

Follow the post-melamine transformation of China's regulatory system to examine:

- How regulatory measures are translated into technical practices by different stakeholders, including industry, government, and civil society; and
- How transparency demands are met through diverse practices, such as record-keeping, corporate messaging and the implementation of industry and government standards.



1 2  
3 4

## TRANSPARENCY IN REGULATORY PRACTICE: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH

- Transparency is actively produced across different scales of experience and via diverse mechanisms.
  - Yet, regulations and policies cross a diverse landscape of actors and domains in their implementation.
- This movement of information, technology and practices that are designed to meet transparency objectives is crucial to understanding the process of information transfer.
  - Different media mobilize diverse experiences of similar narratives (such as government standards and corporate best practices).
- Achieving transparency is often treated as unproblematic: to make *more* information *more* visible.
  - This approach fails to acknowledge the complex, layered systems of information transfer at work.



Technological accountability



## WHAT WE DID & WHERE WE DID IT

Conducted ethnographic and document-based research, primarily in Beijing and China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in addition to Shanghai, Cape Town, South Africa, and the US (2009 – 2015)



Milking Parlor, Inner Mongolia



Modified map by TUBS, distributed under a CC Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported

- Conducted site observations with 10+ dairy corporations, cooperatives and processors of varying sizes in Inner Mongolia and the Beijing area.
  - Surveyed milking practices, testing and security procedures followed by in-depth interviews with workers and farmers.
  - Semi-structured interviews with regional administrators, dairy association representatives and industry representatives.

- Participant observation at food safety and training workshops in China, dairy expositions and international summits in China, South Africa and the US, and risk management and governance workshops in China.



Milk samples for testing

## WHY THIS MATTERS

- China's food and drug safety and security's challenges are still unresolved as the recent vaccine scandal demonstrates (all part of the same system that we have been in partnership with through US FDA offices in China)
  - These challenges raise questions about the state's ability to provide safe food for its population and, indeed, the world.
- Beyond worries over the food stuffs we import from China (worth \$28.8 billion in 2013), opportunities continue for our agricultural exports (totaling \$28.8 billion in 2013)<sup>1</sup>
- Viable solutions to China's domestic food safety challenges include the acquisition of US food producers like that of Shuanghui International's takeover of Virginia's Smithfield Foods in 2013
  - In 2014, one of China's top three dairy processors signed an agreement to set up a milk powder factory for an export market in Kansas together with Dairy Farmers of America.



Tan Kaixing—Imaginechina/AP

**Acknowledgements:** I am grateful for the support from Renmin University of China's School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development (SARD) and the assistance of the College of Economics and Management at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University. Funding provided by the Cultural Anthropology Program and the Law & Social Sciences Program of the National Science Foundation and an earlier Small Grant for Exploratory Research.

<sup>1</sup>US Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service. (2013). China's 2013 Agricultural Trade Report. (GAIN Report No. 14017). Retrieved from [http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/China's%202013%20Agricultural%20Trade%20Report\\_Beijing\\_China%20-%20Peoples%20Republic%20of\\_4-9-2014.pdf](http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/China's%202013%20Agricultural%20Trade%20Report_Beijing_China%20-%20Peoples%20Republic%20of_4-9-2014.pdf)