

**Hanoi consumers' point of view regarding food safety risks :
an approach in terms of social representation**

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Abstract: *This paper makes an analysis of consumer point of view regarding the sanitary risks related to food consumption. Based on a case study of consumers in Hanoi (Vietnam), it shows that this point of view must be analysed in terms of social representation in order to understand the complexity and the social dimension of the interface between risk and the individual. The social representation is analysed using three components: information, attitude and anchorage. Perceived gravity and frequency (of risks) are used to characterise the component "information", declared fear (by consumers) for the component "attitude" and trust (in food quality) for the component "anchorage". This approach shows that consumers of Hanoi are aware of food safety risks, and estimate that available foodstuffs are actually dangerous. However, because they trust in their own practices (of purchasing and preparing food) they do not fear foodborne diseases greatly. This trust might be over enthusiastic. It may just be a way for consumers to reassure themselves, in a context where their demand for insurance, is built in from past domestic and civic co-ordination, yet is not satisfied in the context of urbanisation and economic liberalisation.*

Keywords : consumer, food, risk, trust, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION : SENSIBILITY, PERCEPTION AND REPRESENTATION

The sociological approach of risk perception by ‘laymen’ as opposed to experts led to taking into account both the diversity of risks, and that of the individuals perceiving the risks. According to Slovic (1987) the very features of risk (involuntary, new, diffuse, etc.) make it more or less stressful, and hence more or less acceptable in the laymen's view. In the cultural theory of Douglas and Wildavsky (1984), the focus is placed on cultural features of individuals. These are analysed to explain different attitudes toward facing risks: thus, *bureaucrats* would be the most risk adverse because they consider risks as a threat to social order, whereas *entrepreneurs* would see in risk new opportunities. Works that are more recent focus on the interface between risk and individuals and the components of perception itself (Peretti-Watel, 2000). Perception is considered to have 3 components: (i) perception of the gravity of the risk; (ii) perception of the frequency of the risk (both of which are combined to define what we can call the perception of the “seriousness”, or of the danger for the society in general); and (iii) the threat and associated fear that this risk causes for oneself and for ones’ relatives. This distinction, danger for others (gravity and frequency) / danger for oneself (fear), permit identification of a *bias of optimism* which characterises people who feel secure from risk (weak fear) which they nevertheless see as a threat for society (great seriousness of the risk). This distinction also has the advantage of permitting us to distinguish two of three components of social representation according to Moscovici (1961): the individuals level of information and their attitude. The first can be estimated through the perception of the gravity and frequency and can be compared to available statistical data; the second can be estimated through declared fear. This paper aims to show that this distinction is useful, but not enough to deepen current knowledge on which has been described until now as “sensibility” or as “perception”. Through a study on the Vietnamese consumers point of

view regarding sanitary quality of their foodstuffs, this paper shows the benefit of integrating in the analysis a third component of representation, which deals with the organisation of the content of the representation and the network of meanings it come within, and which Jodelet (1969) calls “anchorage”.

2. FOOD CONSUMPTION IN VIETNAM

2.1. Recent changes in food consumption in Vietnam.

Food consumption in Vietnam has evolved greatly in previous years. This evolution is bound mainly to (1) the increase of the population's purchasing power (+8,8% per year between 1996 and 1999, + 6% subsequently according to the General Office of Statistic of Vietnam, GSO 2002)¹ and (2) the process of urbanisation (+3,8% per year) (Cour, 2001) and changes in consumption patterns that are bound to this (the development of the street restaurant); 3) The policies of economic and politic openness adopted in 1986 (known as *Doi Moi*) which have permitted the infusion of foreign consumption models (the development of supermarkets in urban zones, or the consumption of bread for example). These changes are expressed in overall growth of the value of individual food consumption (+ 25 % between 1993 and 1998) (GSO 2000). This is linked to an increase in the consumption of most foods, apart from root crops and tubers whose consumption declines strongly, also a slight decrease in rice consumption and increase in demand for other cereals like wheat (see Figuié and Bricas, 2003). After a long period (until 1986) of purchase by ration tickets, in state shops, the present period is characterised by a relative abundance, a larger diversity of supply, and a larger number of market transactions.

2.2. The food sanitary risks in Vietnam

This recent period is also characterised by an increase in concern, from some of the public institutions, on food quality. It is expressed by numerous information campaigns aimed at the public by press, television, radio, loudspeakers or posters in streets. Yet, the official number of death due to food poisoning in Vietnam is very low (63 in 2001, 71 in 2002) and reflects probably more the lack of a foodborne disease surveillance system than the sanitary quality of food: analysis on marketed foodstuffs (Quang, 1999) reveals a dramatic situation in terms of microbiological and chemical contamination.

Recently, some high-quality food channels emerged, like “safe vegetables” due to an initiative of the Peoples Committee of Hanoi. Safe vegetables are supposed to be produced to certain standards of quality (controlled use of agrochemicals, quality of irrigation water, etc.)

In spite of consumer’s sensitivity to the sanitary quality of foods, revealed by certain studies (Bridier, 2000), the success of these channels has been limited. It has been attributed to the elevated price of these products, combined to a lack of consumer confidence in the real quality of these products.

To understand better this lack of confidence and the point of view of urban consumers on the relationship between food and health, we carried out a study in Hanoi. A part of the results is presented here.

1) It is useful to remember that 15% of the population lived in 1998 below the food poverty line (GSO, 2000) which means a diary food consumption value inferior to the minimum needs of 2100 kcal/day/capita, or less than a quarter of dollar per capita per day.

3. THE INVESTIGATION : MATERIAL AND METHODS

A survey was taken during July and August 2002 using 200 households of the urban area of Hanoi². The method of sampling used is called the *cluster* method. Thus, three districts with diversified situations (Hoan Kiem, Hai Ba Trung and Cau Giay) were chosen. In each district, sub-district units, then households were randomly selected³. Data was collected by a questionnaire (approved by the municipal authorities), containing a large number of open questions. The two-hour interview was completed in the selected home. Additionally, about ten detailed interviews completed this phase of investigation.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Features of the sample

People interviewed were mainly female (83 % of the sample), persons responsible for food purchase (89.5 %) and for domestic meal preparation (83.5 %). The families are of a medium size of 4/5 people and have an average monthly income a little higher than 445 000 VND per person, less than 30 dollars per person per month (the food poverty line is valued by the General Statistical Office at less than 10 dollars per month).

² This survey was carried out by researchers from CIRAD (Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement, France), and IOS/VASS (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), as a part of the activities of the research consortium “Market and agricultural linkage for cities in Asia” (MALICA)

³ For more details see Figuié, 2003.

4.2. *Qualitative changes in food consumption according to the consumers*

On one hand, according to the majority of people interviewees' the quality of meals has improved during the last ten years (table 1). They justify their answers by the fact that goods are more abundant, more various and that the consumer can choose their foodstuff. However, more than half think that food product quality has fallen during the same period. Fully 62% of those asked thought food products nowadays present a danger for health (table 2).

Table 1 : Change in the quality of meals and marketed foodstuffs according to consumers in Hanoi, 2002

Trends in quality	(1) Quality of meals		(2) Quality of marketed foodstuff	
	#	%	#	%
Has improved	187	93.5%	71	35.5%
Has not changed	10	5.0%	12	6.0%
Has decreased	2	1.0%	112	56.0%
No idea, no answer	1	0.5%	5	2.5%
Total	200	100.0%	200	100.0%

Answers to questions (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, total 200 interviewees'): Do you think that the quality (1) of your meals (2) of marketed foodstuff has improved, has not changed, has decreased in the last ten years?

Table 2 : The danger level of food product according to consumers of Hanoi, 2002

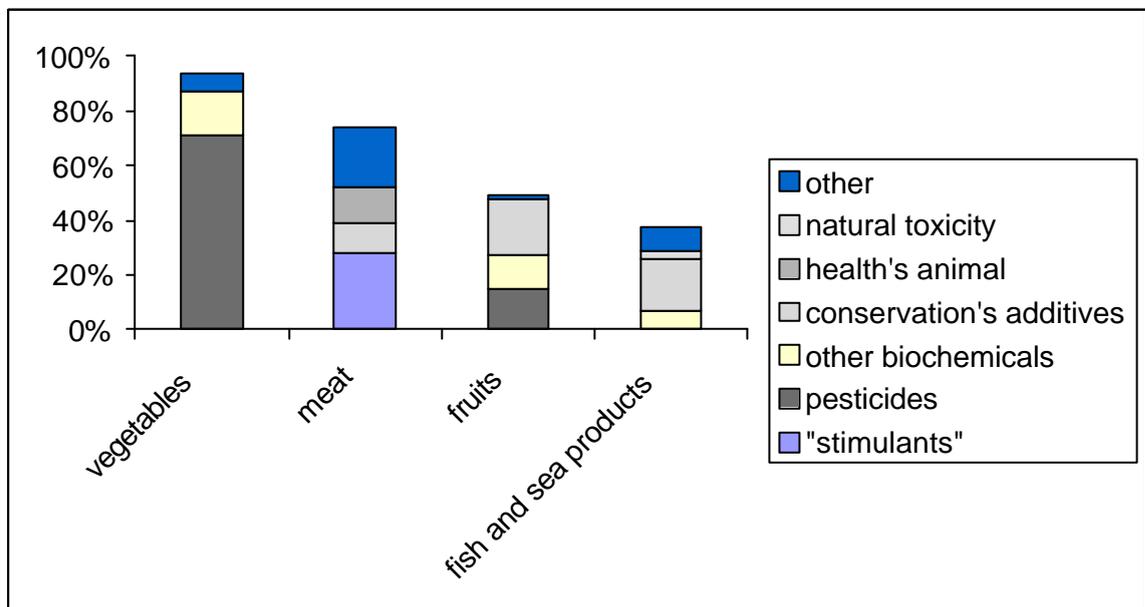
Danger of foodstuff	#	%
Not dangerous at all	2	1%
Rather not dangerous	65	32.5%
Rather dangerous	117	58.5%
Very dangerous	7	3.5%
No idea, no answer	9	4.5%
Total	200	100%

Answer to the question (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, total 200 interviewees'): In your opinion, in general, do the food products available nowadays present dangers for health?

4.3. The nature of the food risk: a “technological risk”

Products presenting a danger for health are clearly identified by interviewees’ (figure 1). Vegetables are mentioned by nearly 90% of interviewees’. Then follows meat (69.5%) fruits (46%) and then aquatic products (37%). When interviewees’ are asked to justify their answer, in the case of vegetables they mentioned above all, the likely presence of pesticide residues. In regards to fruit, the utilisation of preservation products in which fruits would be soaked after harvest adds to this problem (practices essentially linked to fruits imported from China). In the case of meat, answers are varied but concern mainly the utilisation of “stimulants” (a vague term that seems to correspond to growth promoters used in animal husbandry). In the case of fish and other aquatic products (shrimps, crabs, etc), the utilisation of preservation products (urea, formalin, borax) is targeted.

Figure 1: Unsafe foodstuffs and the nature of contamination or danger according to consumers of Hanoi, 2002



% of interviewees. Answers to question (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, 200 interviewees’): According to you, which are the three types of food that present the more of dangers for the health of consumers nowadays? Why? (Spontaneous answers)

Massive distrust is expressed about the increasing utilisation of chemicals in the food commodities chain: pesticides, veterinary drugs, post harvest preservation chemicals. This distrust is not unfounded: utilisation of pesticides in Vietnam increased 75% between 1991 and 1997 (Trung, 1999). It is also the nature of products that is implicated (products sometimes forbidden) as well as the quantities used. Therefore, from the consumer point of view, the food risk appears above all else as a health risk, of a technological nature, in reference to the terminology of Giddens (1991), in opposition to natural risks.

4.4. *The fear of consumers*

In spite of the dangers associated with food products, respondents do not seem very worried. Most of them think that the meals they prepare themselves present little or no danger (table 3).

Table 3 : Domestic meals and the food risk fears of consumers of Hanoi, 2000

Answers	#	%
No ideas, no answer	4	2%
Not dangerous at all	110	55%
Not really dangerous	68	34%
Quite dangerous	18	9%
Very dangerous	0	0%
Total	200	100%

Answers to questions (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, 200 interviewees’): Do you think that there is any danger of people getting ill eating what you prepare at home?

To justify this absence of risk consuming domestic meals, respondents’ evoke their *know-how*. This knowledge deals with their way of choosing foods (table 4) and preparing them (table 5). The freshness of products is by far the first guarantee of safety. This supposes going to the market daily, early in the morning if possible to have the largest choice. Buying from the usual retailer is another factor which is next in importance (answers related to “clean food purchase” need to be specified, a study is underway to investigate

exactly what is meant by this term). The second stage is assuring food quality and hygiene is the method of preparation. This presupposes ways of making foodstuffs safe to eat by: soaking, washing, peeling vegetables, washing and prolonged cooking of meat.

Table 4 : “Anti-risk” purchasing practices according to consumers of Hanoi, 2002

Criteria	#	%
Fresh	193	96.5%
To usual retailers	90	45.0%
Clean	76	38.0%
Without fat	39	19.5%
More expensive	28	14.0%
With a well-known brand	13	6.5%
With a veterinary seal	6	3.0 %
Survey sample	200	*

* *Several answers were possible*

Answers to the question (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, 200 interviewees’): How do you choose the food products you buy to avoid being sick? (spontaneous answers)

Table 5 : “Anti-risk” practices of food preparation according to consumers in Hanoi, 2002.

Reported practices	#	%
Soaking	176	88.0%
Washing	113	56.5%
Peeling	96	48.0%
Cooking	83	41.5%
Using disinfectant to clean the produce	13	6.5%
Boiling water used to clean	6	3.0%
Survey sample	200	*

*Answers to the question (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, 200 interviewees’): How do you prepare, cook, associate... the food products that you buy to avoid being sick? (Spontaneous answers) * Several answers were possible*

5. FOOD POISONING VICTIMS.

As interviewees’ feel relatively safe from food hygiene risks, who is according to them a victim of poisonings? For more than a third of them (36%) anybody can be victim (some add: "if people don't pay attention"). Therefore, if anybody can be a potential victim, it is

clearly know-how that permits people to feel protected. Ignorant people are mentioned as victims by nearly a third of those questioned (31%). Following this are people without hygiene (23.5%), poor people (17%) or those searching for low prices (15.5%). Street restaurants are the only reference to a place of consumption (these answers were spontaneous). When rural people are mentioned, 6 times (3%), their ignorance or their poverty is always underlined. In fact throughout commentaries from interviewees' all these characteristics seem to be connected in describing a portrait of the victim: their hygiene practices are inadequate either through ignorance or through lack of means.

4.5 Confidence of the consumers.

Consumers generally rely on their usual retailers (table 4). But when they are asked about the health risks associated with a few channels that indicate quality the responses are quite different.

Table 6 : Reliability of quality sign

	Not at all	Not really dangerous	Rather dangerous	Very dangerous	Do not know, no answer	Total
Food from supermarket	55.5%	24.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%	200
Food from your usual street market	38.0%	43.0%	17.0%	0,0%	2.0%	200
Food with veterinary seal	49.5%	33.0%	9.0%	0.0%	8.5%	200
Food with a well-known brand	42.0%	37.5%	15.5%	0.0%	5.0%	200

Answer to the questions (CIRAD/IOS investigation, 2002, 200 interviewees): “Do you think that there is any danger of becoming seek eating the food bought...”

People seem to trust the quality of food from supermarkets or with a veterinary seal “because, it has a guarantee from the State” (a lot of supermarkets are State owned

enterprises). However, they also comment: “but I do not go into supermarkets”⁴; or “but I have never seen veterinary seal”⁵. Concerning well-known brands, it is not the brand itself that people do not trust but people fear buying imitations. These comments explain why consumers hardly mentioned these points in their “anti-risk” purchasing practices (table 4). The trust associated with purchases from their usual street retail market seems in fact to be limited only by “because they do not produce themselves what they sell”. We can conclude that, in developing their daily purchasing practices, consumers trust close relationships with their usual retailers (table 4). This can be described as a kind of “domestic convention”, based on the on-going nature of their relationship (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1987; Sylvander, 1995). But we also see that consumers are asking for some moral guarantee, associated with the State, this can be called a “civic convention”, which relies on some collective principles that are able to structure the relationship between economics actors. The consumers’ trust relies on these two points as illustrated by the remark of one interviewee: “I trust the quality of vegetables that I buy because my retailer is a member of the Party”.

6. DISCUSSION

Hanoi consumers consider their food as dangerous. Their comments echo the many information campaigns issued by various institutes, as shown by their answers: “they say that...”, “I heard on the television that...”. Therefore, we can conclude that consumers are informed and that in a way *‘the message has been passed’*. Does that mean that they are

⁴ In fact, supermarkets are not an important retail point in terms of quantity, they market only 2% of fresh vegetables, Tan Loc 2002

⁵ The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development reports that only 25 % of the meat sold daily in Hanoi markets has not received a quality stamp from veterinary officers (Quang, 1999).

sensitive to food quality? It is useful to continue the analysis by asking : “What do consumers make of this message?” In particular how it is expressed in their attitudes and practices? We used their declared fear as an indicator of attitude. This fear is relatively small, at least concerning family meals. The confidence of consumers in the quality of domestically prepared meals is linked to practices of purchasing and preparing food, which permit the avoidance of risk. This confidence is probably exaggerated: according to data from the Vietnam Food Administration (Vietnam Food Administration, 2002), nearly 60% of food poisoning occur from domestic meals. To solve this obvious contradiction between the perceived gravity and frequency and the declared fear, consumers designate the victims: those who do not know, those who are poor, categories to which none of interviewees’ pretend to belong. Additionally if consumers seem to trust their usual retailers for quality purchases, it would seem that they are expecting more and better guarantees.

7. CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from this study on the potential success of channels for “safe” foodstuffs in Hanoi? Does consumer confidence associated with their own practices act as an obstacle? The first element of an answer could be found in the assessment of the efficiency of these practices. Analyses of food quality in the consumers’ plates should be completed, in addition to those conducted so far on the selling spots. Then, if these practices prove to be inefficient, communication regarding practices themselves would be necessary and could help to develop the channels for “safe” foodstuffs. Finally, whether the consumers’ trust in their own practices is ill founded or not, might not be the only relevant question. Another (possibly unrelated) question is the “raison d’être” of this confidence. This confidence, apparently in contradiction with the perceived level of danger, as well as statistical data, should not surprise us. Based on the work of Giddens,

Peretti-Wattel (2000) reminds us that confidence is crucial. It permits us to act normally, in daily life: “Each one of us entrenches him/herself behind a *protective cocoon*, an umbrella that deflects potential danger, taking for granted that most of these dangers will not occur. This is done so as to be able to direct his/her actions efficiently, controlling consciously a reasonable number of dangers” (p 88).

In the case of Vietnam, the extension in food supply channels in towns has increased the distance between producers and consumers. Trust relations between individuals are limited to a close universe: the street market, the household. Public institutions in charge of connecting the urban consumers with more distant actors, such as the producers, are not sufficiently active. Consumer confidence in their own practices might be interpreted as a withdrawal in the new world of consumption (as opposed to the period of shortage) where relations between actors and in particular, trust bases are being redefined. To build reliable quality signs one must understand the nature of confidence and its function in consumers’ behaviour. Thus, not only must information and attitude be taken into account, but also the third dimension of social representation: anchorage (Moscovici, 1961; Jodelet 1989). This illustration of the social dimension of trust and quality is yet another argument in favour of developing analyses in terms of *social representation* rather than in terms of *sensibility* or *perception* (Peretti-Wattel, 2000). The analysis can not be limited to the way people perceive and handle risk, but it should also deal with the construction of new collective references. If in the past public actors, such as the Communist Party, guaranteed the protection of consumers, what about today in the more liberalised economy? Here lies one of the major issues in the functioning of food supply channels in a transitional economy.

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