

# Social trust eroded in Chinese product-tampering incident

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For about a decade, Chinese consumers weren't getting what they paid for when they purchased Wuchang, a special brand of gourmet rice that has a peculiar scent. The quality was being diluted when less expensive rice was aromatized, added to the packages of the high-quality rice, and sold at the premium price. Researchers at the University of Illinois studied how the tampering scandal affected the public's perception of risk and their subsequent behavior.

Because public anxiety over the fake [rice](#) issue was more pronounced in urban districts, the researchers focused on residents of Xi'an, ultimately analyzing interviews and survey responses of 225 people.

"Over half of the people we interviewed were aware of the product tampering, but only very vaguely," said U of I agricultural communications professor Lulu Rodriguez. "They rely much more on interpersonal communication with friends and family members for information."

The study also showed that although people didn't understand the details or [potential health risks](#) that the tainted rice may cause, the public's perception of risk was considered to be high.

"In this case, their trust of society, such as the government, food-safety regulations, and the mass media was eroded," Rodriguez said. "This incident came in the wake of other food-safety scandals in China. We hear people say in the interviews, 'we are left to fend for ourselves.'"

They seemed to feel like they need to make use of whatever information sources they have and make do because the government cannot be trusted. And the government tried to place the blame on local agencies."

Rodriguez explained that rice retailers knew the product tampering was taking place. "Production was not jiving with what was being sold," she said. About 800,000 tons of Wuchang rice were produced but up to 10 million tons were being sold. Adding 1 pound of fragrance to ten tons of rice allowed the lower-quality rice to pass as the more expensive Wuchang brand rice. The Chinese Central TV finally broke the story, saying that the government was doing its best to punish the culprits and that they would be dealt with accordingly, but that wasn't good enough to calm the public's anxiety.

"Fortunately, there wasn't any real health risk, but that didn't stop people from thinking about health-related concerns," Rodriguez said. "It is food, after all, and the public didn't know exactly what was being added to the rice. It shows that if you have the public perception as a communicator, you have a problem even if the accusations are not correct."

Although their knowledge level was low, the uncertainty of what was perceived of as involuntary risk was high—high enough that their behavior shifted to not buying the rice.

"More openness is needed," Rodriguez said. "This incident reminded me of the horrible way that the SARS epidemic was handled, in which the Chinese government delayed notifying the World Health Organization of the outbreak for three months. Keeping quiet just makes people more nervous."

Rodriguez said that the problem was compounded because no one took ownership of the scandal. "They seemed to think that all they had to do

was to assure the public that they were doing their best. But what exactly were they doing? It created high anxiety, particularly in urban districts where rice outlets are concentrated," she said. "We also noted that although people seemed to know about the incident, they were very reluctant to speak out about it, fearing possible repercussions."

As an agricultural communications educator, Rodriguez views this incident as a teachable moment.

"There is a window of opportunity for us," she said. "There are Chinese students who come to the University of Illinois for undergraduate and graduate studies. These younger communicators will have a broader perspective to report on incidents like this. We hope that there can be mechanisms developed that can reestablish trust. Trust is very difficult to build and very easy to destroy."

"Social trust and risk knowledge, perception and behaviours resulting from a rice tampering scandal" was published in an issue of *International Journal of Food Safety*.

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