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## **FOOD IN CHINA: VOLUMES UP, QUALITY DOWN?**

### **THE FOOD SUPPLY DEBATE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

*Antonia Menapace*

The Communist Party of China (CPC) is having to face up to new developments in communications technology. More and more Chinese are using micro-blogs and other internet platforms to express their dissatisfaction. This presents a huge problem for the government, because the Chinese people are becoming increasingly aware of the serious deficiencies that have such an effect on their everyday lives. This type of networking within modern society is causing the system to break down. This is particularly evident in the case of the country's much-criticised food supply policy, which is aimed at satisfying the needs of society in the face of scarce resources. The government seems to be setting the wrong priorities and runs the risk of attracting even more criticism from its people.

### **FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SAFETY IN CHINA**

Food supply policies include food security (ensuring adequate quantities of food), and food safety (ensuring that the food is of sufficiently high quality). The Communist Party has traditionally seen quantity as being the key issue. The bleak years of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" and the Cultural Revolution are still fresh in many people's memories. Instead of leading to economic hegemony, these political concepts simply resulted in empty food cupboards and millions dying of hunger. During that time, the Party tried to calm the Chinese people and satisfy the requirements of international treaties with reports of full grain stores and high crop yields. From the very early years of the People's Republic, the Communist Party set great

store by being self-sufficient in grains and cereals. Today the Chinese government needs to supply over 500 million tonnes per year,<sup>1</sup> and by 2020 this requirement will have gone up to 600 million tonnes. This is a huge challenge for Beijing, bearing in mind the scarcity of current resources. In the past, the government was confident of reaching these targets and boasted that it could feed its 1.4 billion citizens without outside help.<sup>2</sup> China's economic reforms over the last thirty years have literally borne fruit for the CPC. Millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and their food needs have been met.

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In contrast to many other countries in the world, China will presumably be able to meet its commitment to the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people suffering from hunger by 2015. This amounts to a real feather in the cap for the government on the international stage, and underlines its self-reliance and self-determination – attributes that China would like to maintain in its role as an emerging superpower. It believes a rich country should be able to feed itself – but exactly how it achieves this is of secondary importance.

However, many politically-aware and increasingly well-informed sectors of Chinese society believe that Beijing's attitude in these matters is untenable. Increasingly, they are accusing the Communist Party of putting its image on the international stage before the well-being of its people. China likes to portray itself as an emerging superpower, an economic miracle, an intermediary in Korean politics and a "knight in shining armour" that is capable of helping out with Europe's sovereign debt problems. This is an image the government is keen to bolster at all costs. It believes that by focusing on economic success and international prestige, it will increase its support amongst the people.

1 | Moritz Esken et al., "Food Security und ländliche Entwicklung: Gefährdung der Quantität der Nahrungsmittelproduktion", in: Susanne Löhr and René Trappel (eds.), *Task Force: Nahrungsmittel in China – Food Security- und Food Safety Problematik in China*, Duisburger Arbeitspapiere Ostasienwissenschaften No. 89/2011, 9-10.

2 | Cf. "China kann Getreideversorgung gewährleisten", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Germany, 25 Mar 2011, <http://big5.fmprc.gov.cn/gate/big5/de.chineseembassy.org/det/zgyw/t809668.htm> (accessed 7 Feb 2012).

After all, the political credentials of today's leadership were gained during the "golden decades" since the introduction of China's reform and liberalization policies. However, when it comes to the Party's food supply policies, an important ingredient is missing. Modern Chinese society has stopped asking "what are we going to eat?" and has started asking "what are we eating?" because when it comes to food, there is now a yawning gap between quantity and quality.

Frequent media reports of excessive vegetable breeding and glowing blue pork meat are a constant reminder of the poor state of the country's food situation.<sup>3</sup> One of the main reasons is the lack of controls on food production and processing. For a long time now, Chinese farmers have tended to use massive amounts of chemicals in an attempt to increase yields. Most moved away from organic farming methods early on in the reform era, and agriculture started to reflect the Communist Party's attitude that quantity is more important than quality as it brings higher profits. This kind of policy has far-reaching implications for society as a whole. It is not so long since the milk scandal of 2008, which shocked people not just in China but all over the world. Several thousand babies suffered from kidney stones after drinking milk that had been adulterated with the industrial chemical melamine. Four children died. The melamine had been added to simulate higher protein content. The scandal brought to light something that was standard practice in the Chinese food industry.<sup>4</sup> Other countries were also affected, with traces of melamine also

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3 | Cf. "Explodierende Melonen entsetzen Landwirte", *Spiegel Online*, 17 May 2011, <http://spiegel.de/wissenschaft/natur/0,1518,763114,00.html> (accessed 18 Jan 2012); "Wachstumsverstärker in Chinas Gemüse: Gesundheitsrisiko für Konsumenten", *German.China.Org.Cn*, China Internet Information Center (CIIC) (ed.), 19 Jul 2011, [http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-07/19/content\\_23022711.htm](http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-07/19/content_23022711.htm) (accessed 18 Jan 2012); "Shanghai: Blau glühendes Schweinemett: Darf's noch etwas mehr sein?", *German.China.Org.Cn*, CIIC (ed.), 8 Apr 2011, [http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-04/08/content\\_22317957.htm](http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-04/08/content_22317957.htm) (accessed 3 Jan 2012).

4 | Cf. "Chinese melamine scandal widens", *BBC News*, 31 Oct 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7701477.stm> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

being found in exported eggs and flour.<sup>5</sup> In Germany, the health authorities found evidence of the poison in sweets.<sup>6</sup> Restrictions or outright bans on the importing of Chinese products soon followed, creating an intolerable situation for an economic superpower like China.

The inevitable reaction to such a scandal was a drastic tightening of controls in the food production industry. However, instead of guaranteeing the quality of Chinese milk, the government did the opposite and actually reduced the minimum nutritional value requirement. They believed that this would stop people adding melamine. Today, Chinese milk only has to have a protein content of 2.8 per cent in order to be sold in the country's supermarkets. This is 0.15 per cent less than under the former legislation.<sup>7</sup>

It is cases like this that make the Chinese people start to question their country's leadership. How can people trust the Communist Party if it is clearly incapable of guaranteeing basic foodstuffs? The government is not taking public concerns over food quality seriously, let alone taking steps to resolve the issues. Indeed, Beijing is ignoring the complaints about quality and simply continuing to focus on increasing production.

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### **THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM – THE “PERPETUUM MOBILE” OF THE ECONOMIC BOOM**

The poor quality of much of China's agricultural production is mostly down to polluted natural resources, something that can largely be blamed on the unsustainable industrialisation policies of the previous “golden” decades. An expansion of heavy industry resulted in the People's Republic having the highest emissions of mercury, nitrogen

5 | Cf. Li Daina, “Melamine found throughout China's food supply”, *The Epoch Times*, 31 Oct 2008, <http://theepochtimes.com/n2/china-news/melamine-in-china-food-supply-6525.html> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

6 | Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (ed.), “Mit Melamin belastete Weichkaramellen ‘White Rabbit Creamy Candies’ aus China sind nicht sicher”, Statement No. 039/2008 of the FIRA, 2 Oct 2008.

7 | David Cohen, “Return of China's Milk Issue”, *The Diplomat*, 2 Dec 2011, <http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2011/12/03/return-of-chinas-milk-issue> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

dioxide and sulphur dioxide of any country in the world. This has not only had an impact on the climate, but also on agricultural production. Scarce land has been massively polluted and, in many cases, is now totally unproductive due to soil contamination, over-acidification and extensive forest damage.<sup>8</sup> Artificial fertilizers and pesticides are being used in huge quantities in order to try and improve yields from barren soils. Every year, China uses one-third of the world's production of nitrate fertilizers.<sup>9</sup> Fresh water supplies are as scarce as they are polluted. 67 per cent of Chinese river water is already too contaminated to use for agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Air quality has also been affected by the country's industrialization policies. In the period leading up to the Olympic Games in 2008, there was a marked improvement in air quality, but in recent years this has once again worsened and the country is suffering more and more from industrial smog.

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This also has an impact on agricultural production. If the fundamentals of production are not right, the quality of the end product will not be right. Polluted drinking water ends up in fruit and vegetables, while breeding animals are fed with contaminated grains. Harmful substances accumulate in the food chain and eventually arrive at the consumer in concentrated form. Beijing appears not to be taking this problem seriously. Instead of improving the quality of natural resources, the government is focusing on measures designed to increase yields. In order to deal with the lack of clean groundwater, farmers are being taught, as part of research projects, to collect rainwater and to use it for crops. This in itself is a commendable and sustainable concept but, in light of the risks posed by acid

8 | China's emissions of nitrogen dioxide alone rose by 53 per cent between 2000 and 2006. Cf. Martin David et al., "China's Food Safety: Gefahr durch Umweltbelastung", in: Löhr and Trappel (eds.), *Task Force: Nahrungsmittel in China – Food Security- und Food Safety Problematik in China*, n. 1, 21.

9 | Uwe Hoering, "Die Landwirtschaft als Versuchsfeld für Reformen", Asienstiftung, EU-China: Civil Society Forum (ed.), *Landwirtschaft in China: Zwischen Selbstversorgung und Weltmarktintegration*, Essen, 2010, 6.

10 | David et al., "Chinas Food Safety: Gefahr durch Umweltbelastung", in: Löhr and Trappel (eds.), *Task Force: Nahrungsmittel in China – Food Security- und Food Safety Problematik in China*, n. 1, 24.

rain, is of doubtful benefit for the quality of the harvest. State agricultural research projects are also heavily focused on the issue of supply. The main goal is to produce robust high-yield rice and other grains. This is one development that can be seen as positive, as these types of seed can thrive in poor quality soils as well as offering high yields without the over-use of chemicals.

A cornerstone of Chinese agricultural policies is the need to increase the amount of land available for cultivation. Industrialization and uncontrolled urbanisation has resulted in a massive loss of cultivable land. Since the mid-1990s, the People's Republic has turned over around 8.5 million hectares of agricultural land to other purposes, which amounts to almost seven per cent of the total available cultivable land in the country.<sup>11</sup> The fertile coastal regions that were once the focus of economic reform have been particularly badly affected. As part of the industrialization process, whole swathes of land were switched from agriculture to industry or housing by local governments, who put short-term profits above sustainable development. The modern suburbs of many large cities now stand on what was previously fertile farming land. This type of development, which was typical of the economic boom, was diametrically opposed to the needs of maintaining agricultural capacity. In order to reverse this trend, in 2006, the government decided that there should be a minimum of 120 million hectares of agricultural land area across the country as a whole. Beijing hopes to achieve this through strict land-use planning. The amount of cultivable land is to be steadily increased. The government believes it can create millions of hectares of additional farmland by consolidating scattered farming villages and agricultural land areas.<sup>12</sup>

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11 | Cf. Robert F. Ash, "Feeding Billions: Food Security in China", *ISN Insights*, Center for Security Studies, Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zurich (ETH), 29 Mar 2011, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISN-Insights/Detail?lng=en&id=128073&contextid734=128073&contextid735=127105&tabid=127105> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

12 | Esken et al., "Food Security und ländliche Entwicklung: Gefährdung der Quantität der Nahrungsmittelproduktion", n. 1, 11-12.

## A GLOBAL FOOD SUPPLY?

The need to safeguard resources is starting to have a growing impact on China's foreign policy. The Chinese leadership is looking to relocate some agricultural production to other countries. Many critics see this practice as a form of land grabbing, because huge stretches of land abroad are being leased or bought to satisfy China's

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domestic needs.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese have become particularly interested in Africa as a place to carry out this type of land acquisition. It is not easy to prove that this is actually official Chinese policy, because the state itself is rarely seen to be a party to these activities. Instead, private investors are encouraged to set up food production operations in foreign countries. The state then works behind the scenes to ensure that lucrative contracts are negotiated between Chinese businesses and foreign governments. By signing free trade agreements and reducing Chinese import duties on African agricultural products, the Communist Party is encouraging domestic businesses to become actively involved in offshore farming.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture proposed that, in the long-term, all of the country's soya production should be moved overseas. However, this proposal was soon officially put on ice. Reports from non-governmental organisations suggest, however, that large Chinese businesses and the government have indeed acquired extensive tracts of agricultural land running to tens of thousands of hectares. A significant proportion of the food produced on this land is apparently destined for the Chinese market. It is known that such projects are already being carried out in countries such as Brazil, Myanmar, Mozambique, Cameroon and Laos.<sup>15</sup>

- 13 | For an explanation of the term "land grabbing" see e.g.: Constanze von Oppeln and Rafael Schneider, "Land Grabbing: Den Armen wird der Boden unter den Füßen weggezogen", *Welthungerhilfe*, No. 8, Apr 2009, [http://welthungerhilfe.de/uploads/tx\\_dwhhinfomaterial/Brennpunkt\\_8\\_Land\\_Grabbing.pdf](http://welthungerhilfe.de/uploads/tx_dwhhinfomaterial/Brennpunkt_8_Land_Grabbing.pdf) (accessed 18 Jan 2012).
- 14 | Cf. Uwe Hoering, "Chinas Landwirtschaft global", Asienstiftung, EU-China: Civil Society Forum (ed.), *Landwirtschaft in China: Zwischen Selbstversorgung und Weltmarktintegration*, Essen, Asienstiftung, 2010, 24; Bob Wekesa, "Africa: When will the West ever learn", *China Daily*, 1 Dec 2011, 9.
- 15 | Cf. "Seized! Grain Briefing Annex", 10/2008, <http://grain.org/article/entries/93-seized-the-2008-landgrab-for-food-and-financial-security> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

The Communist Party has attracted a huge amount of international criticism for this dubious practice, especially in Africa. There is talk of “neo-colonialism” and “exploitation of resources”. Last summer, it was suggested that China’s policy was partly responsible for the serious hunger problems in the Horn of Africa.<sup>16</sup> Beijing vehemently denies this accusation. As China endeavours to secure its domestic food supply, it is becoming increasingly caught up in international debate. It is constantly being forced to defend its good intentions and accuses the international community of not putting all its own cards on the table when it comes to Africa. According to Beijing, Chinese activities in Africa are simply part of development aid programmes,<sup>17</sup> and the Communist Party is indeed involved in a whole series of projects aimed at improving the infrastructure in a number of African countries.<sup>18</sup> A good example would be the South-South initiative in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organisation.<sup>19</sup>

### ORGANIC FARMS FOR THE CHINESE ELITE

When it comes to ensuring China’s domestic food supply and resources, Beijing does not appear to be meeting the people’s needs. While the goals of being self-sufficient and combating hunger have largely been achieved, increased affluence has encouraged people to become more demanding. With the constant growth of the middle class in China, simply overcoming hunger is not enough, people now have higher expectations.

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More and more Chinese consumers would like to see an expansion of organic farming, which suggests that the

16 | See e.g.: “Deutschland gibt China Mitschuld an Hungersnot”, *Die Welt*, 28 Jul 2011, <http://welt.de/politik/ausland/article/13512683/Deutschland-gibt-China-Mitschuld-an-Hungersnot.html> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

17 | Cf. “China refutes land grab claims in Africa”, *People’s Daily Online*, 8 Dec 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/7670528.html> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

18 | Cf. Stefan Gehrold and Lena Tietze, “Far From Altruistic – China’s Presence in Senegal”, *KAS International Reports*, 11/2011, 90-118.

19 | See e.g. Ministry of Agriculture of the People’s Republic of China (ed.), “FAO, China forge alliance to improve food security in poor countries”, 2 Mar 2008, [http://english.agri.gov.cn/ga/ic/200906/t20090624\\_1128.htm](http://english.agri.gov.cn/ga/ic/200906/t20090624_1128.htm) (accessed 18 Jan 2012).



“organic” quality symbol is likely to have a promising future in the Chinese market. Tied in with this is the idea of cultivating food exclusively on small farms that maintain high quality standards. However, Chinese production capacity does not appear to be sufficient to meet these aspirations. The manager of an organic dairy is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying: “Our population is way too big for everybody to eat organic food.”<sup>20</sup> Here, the key issue is consumer opinion, along with the question of what exactly is meant by the term “organic”. Quantity does not necessarily mean sacrificing quality. Organic farming is particularly associated with the need to comply with specific standards relating to animal welfare and farming practices – something that is not seen as being the case in mass production. This is something that needs to be addressed in order to gain consumer confidence.

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However, the Chinese government is going down a path that could lead to one of the most short-sighted mistakes ever made by the Communist Party: it is feeding the country’s political leadership on stocks of domestically-grown, organic food. All over the country, there are farms dedicated to producing food for Party members and a handful of select people, including both Chinese and expatriates. These farms are fenced off and protected by guards, with no access for “ordinary” people. This may sound like science fiction, but in China it is everyday reality, something that is rooted in the “socialist” tradition. Even during Mao Zedong’s rule, a special food supply system was introduced to ensure that political leaders would not go hungry in times of food shortages.

Beijing vehemently denies the existence of these farms and guards this parallel food system like a state secret, but it is not difficult to trace these special food supply channels. Since 1955, a state-owned company has looked after feeding the Communist Party. Thirteen subsidiaries of this company supply the political elite with fruit and vegetables, meat and processed products. Many of these

20 | Cf. Barbara Demick, “In China, what you eat tells who you are”, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Sep 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2011/sep/16/world/la-fg-china-elite-farm-20110917> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

companies boast on their websites that they supply food to the government. This food is produced on special farms,<sup>21</sup> one of which was discovered by journalists not far from Beijing. Local people know what goes on here “behind closed doors” and say that organic beans, onions and peppers are grown for the exclusive consumption of government officials. The Party also has its own poultry farm in Beijing which supplies the National People’s Congress with eggs that for sure are melamine-free. The farm is regularly inspected by Party representatives to ensure top-quality products, with special attention being paid to the feed, water and health of the chickens.<sup>22</sup>

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The government is making every possible effort to restrict the free flow of information, in order to maintain peace and “harmony” within Chinese society. It censored the report by the journalist who uncovered the Shunyi Farm scandal, and other reports have also been suppressed, with journalists being threatened with draconian punishments.<sup>23</sup>

#### **PRODUCT SAFETY: DO I KNOW WHAT I’M EATING?**

It is not just agriculture that has serious shortcomings. The Chinese people are also losing confidence in what they are eating because of the lack of transparency in the production, processing and distribution of their food. Product labels are often misleading. Plastic bottles are filled with contaminated drinking water and then sold; old oil is filtered and resold as fresh cooking oil. At best, these products lead to food poisoning, and at worst they can result in death. The Chinese government likes to make out that it is taking strong action against those who are responsible for these scandals. It has launched major campaigns, imposed large fines and is trying to calm consumers by showing that it is in control of the situation. Indeed, in the wake of the melamine scandal in 2008, it set up a high-level Food Safety Commission which included three vice-premiers. Beijing is hoping that setting up such a high-level Commission proves how seriously it is treating

21 | Yvonne Su, “China’s elite enjoys untainted fruits”, *Asia Times*, 7 Jul 2011, <http://atimes.com/atimes/China/MG07Ad02.html> (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

22 | *Ibid.*

23 | Cf. Demick, “In China, what you eat tells who you are”, n. 20.

the issue of food supply. But this still fails to address the real root of the problem – the lack of effective controls. Since 2009, an amended law has been passed on agricultural product safety, but its implementation has generally been found wanting. Half a year after it came into effect, only one or two provinces had started to set reforms in motion. It seems as if the government is losing its grip in this respect. In December 2011, another case of tainted milk came to light. Samples taken at the large dairy firm “Mengniu” revealed traces of the carcinogen aflatoxin in its milk products. This is not the first time the company has been involved in this kind of scandal: as far back as 2009, experts were issuing warnings about contaminated milk. Several hundred schoolchildren had to be treated in hospital after consuming Mengniu products. But the company is still happily continuing production.<sup>24</sup>

**Lack of transparency in production processes means it is often difficult to really ascertain a product’s origin.** Those who can afford it are increasingly turning to foreign brands, but this can also be a false dawn. Lack of transparency in production processes means it is often difficult to really ascertain a product’s origin. This issue reared its head at the end of 2011, when another scandal caused public outcry. A young man from Jilin province died after drinking strawberry milk. The authorities ascertained that the product had been massively contaminated with pesticides. The milk had been advertised as being produced by a large international food chain – but in fact it had been produced and bottled in China.<sup>25</sup>

Some consumers have begun to take the matter of their food supply into their own hands. A small group of housewives in Zhengzhou has come together to grow their own vegetables on small plots of land that they lease for 10 euros a month.<sup>26</sup>

24 | Zhou Wenting, “Toxins found in tainted milk brand product”, *China Daily*, 27 Dec 2011, 5.

25 | Cohen, “Return of China’s Milk Issue”, n. 7.

26 | “Städter wollen Gemüse immer häufiger selbst anbauen”, *German.China.Org.Cn*, CIIC (ed.), 4 Jul 2011, [http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-07/04/content\\_22918484.htm](http://german.china.org.cn/china/2011-07/04/content_22918484.htm) (accessed 18 Jan 2012).

## THE COMMUNIST PARTY CANNOT IGNORE THE PROTESTS

The Communist Party is trying to embrace the changes that are happening in the country. But it seems to have overlooked certain major changes that are happening in Chinese society, and it seems particularly powerless when it comes to dealing with the potential of the new media. The speed with which news can fly around the internet was demonstrated last summer with the “non-governmental reporting” on the Wenzhou train crash. The internet was the only place where criticism was voiced about the actual scale of the disaster and the inadequate response of the government.

The Communist Party is intensifying its efforts to control internet forums. Leading politicians are calling for stricter controls, in order to prevent the spread of “rumours”. One of the ways it is trying to achieve this is by taking away the internet community’s anonymity. If you want to start a blog in Beijing, you now have to provide your personal details.<sup>27</sup> But despite this, users of the Chinese internet platform Weibo are still not mincing their words, and civil society is flourishing with open discussions about ongoing injustices. “We are being poisoned, while those in power are surrounding themselves with fresh air and organic food” – this is the accusation being thrown at the Communist Party. It is these kinds of accusations that should be giving the country’s political leaders food for thought. Promised reforms in the area of food security have come to nothing, and recurring scandals have been largely unheeded. As a result, politicians have incurred the distrust of their citizens – a big mistake, because it is society’s trust that has so far kept the Communist Party at the top.

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The Chinese people are becoming increasingly infuriated by the disparity between the living standards of the rulers and those under their rule. This is not only mirrored in the

27 | “China will seine Blogger besser kontrollieren”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 17 Dec 2011, [http://nzz.ch/nachrichten/politik/international/china\\_will\\_seine\\_blogger\\_besser\\_kontrollieren\\_1.13683576](http://nzz.ch/nachrichten/politik/international/china_will_seine_blogger_besser_kontrollieren_1.13683576) (accessed 2 Mar 2012).

country's food policies, but also in people's everyday lives as a whole. Increasingly, there are reports that the air quality is much better in Zhongnanhai, Beijing's government district, than in the rest of the city. The country's leaders are keeping particulates at bay by installing air filters all over the area. And during the winter months, people really feel the difference between themselves and their Party leaders, with "ordinary" households having to wait until the first week of November before their district heating is switched on, while Party leaders have already been enjoying heating in their residential compounds for several weeks. The political elite not only eat better, they also breathe better and live better.

Chinese society is watching its leaders – from the unresolved food scandals, to the way the elite are able to enjoy organic food and cleaner air. The Communist Party needs to address these grievances, otherwise it will have to start bracing itself to face social unrest.