

Recalibrating Risk through Media

Two Cases of Intentional Food Poisoning in Japan

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Abstract In 2008, a case of intentional food poisoning involving Chinese imported dumplings resulted in mass panic in Japan. Within a context of sensitive bilateral relations and Japanese agriculture in decline, the media were key to the enhanced risk perception among the public. To shed light on the concrete ways of risk recalibration by the media, the article compares the incident's coverage to a strikingly similar event in 2014 involving domestic produce. Drawing on the Social Amplification of Risk framework, a qualitative content analysis shows how the specific discursive construction of both incidents led to two different levels of risk, primarily through the framing of the incidents by references to former experiences and symbolic connotations. At the intersection of food, media and risk, the article also contributes to the understanding of perceptions of domestic as opposed to foreign or imported risks, and those in power to label these as such.

Keywords Japan, food incident, Social Amplification of Risk, media, culinary nationalism

Introduction

In January 2008, frozen dumplings imported from China sickened a Japanese family. Public hysteria and mass panic followed, resulting in irrationally high concerns regarding Chinese foods; a reaction which scholars partially ascribed to the media coverage.¹ In 2014 a strikingly similar incident occurred in Japan, this time involving domestically produced frozen foods.² Despite the similarities with the 2008 case, this time no public anger followed, reactions in consumption behavior remained limited and the incident did not become part of the collective history as the former incident had.

The two cases are strikingly similar intentional food poisonings, caused by employees disgruntled about their working conditions. All variables match, except that one employee was Chinese, the other Japanese. Yet the media coverage and public reaction were dramatically different, suggesting that the food risk was construed at a different level. By comparatively analyzing the

manifestation of both risks in the coverage of two major national dailies, this article aims at demonstrating the concrete role of the media in exacerbating and attenuating public fears and the impact thereof on the Japanese food safety debate.

The article proceeds thusly: the following section outlines the calibration of risk and safe food in the media. Drawing on the Social Amplification of Risk framework, I identify five analytical attributes for increased concern in an information flow. Next, I contextualize both cases, explaining how, against a background of severing bilateral relations, Japan's low food self-sufficiency ratio and its import dependency on China facilitate a culinary nationalism manifested in the perception of 'safe' domestic foods as opposed to 'dangerous' Chinese imports. A qualitative content analysis follows: the two cases and their media coverage are discussed along the defined categories of increased concern. Subsequently, a comparison situates these findings against the backdrop of the Japanese food discourse. Despite their parallels, the discursive construction of the incidents in the media coverage led to two different risk levels. In the conclusion, I argue that the framing of the incidents by referencing to former experiences and symbolic images is key to this difference. The first incident was portrayed in a context of Chinese food-related problems and other threats, defining the case as a food safety crisis affecting the whole country. The near absence of food safety references in the second case 'reduced' the poisoning act to a criminal case, devoid of its circumstances but also of any symbolic meaning.

Framing and recalibrating safe food in the media

Ulrich Beck's idea of a "risk society" recognizes that in its preoccupation with safety, our society has generated the notion of risk.³ As a concept, risk developed from the potential impact of an incalculable hazard into a broader idea of uncertainty in society. Risks are "particularly open to social definition and construction", and Beck singles out the mass media as key to the definition of these risks.⁴ In its uncertainty, the *potential* aspect of risk can be constructed as an *actual* danger and as

such provides opportunities for those in power to define or recalibrate certain risks.⁵ Whoever decides which food is safe (enough) to eat, controls the commercial, societal, and political implications of this decision.

The analysis in this paper relies on the conceptual framework of socially amplified risk (SARF), developed by Roger Kasperson for exploring how reactions to risk are a function of the social processes through which risk is communicated and interpreted.⁶ Like Beck, Kasperson singles out the media -a primary source of information about a risk event- as a potential amplifying station during a public health incident.⁷ However, news coverage is not a one-way process but one of negotiated understandings: media actors shape but also respond to public interests and wider social debates.⁸ Identifying which social issues are picked up by the media, and which are not, gives us insight into the narrative framing a food incident. While acknowledging that the media are not the only information source or ‘amplifying station’ during a public health crisis, risk researchers have applied SARF to explore the role of media in scientific risk assessment,⁹ and in influencing consumer perceptions of food risks.¹⁰

In order to specify how social agents amplify risk, Kasperson identified four attributes of the information flow: the *volume* of the flow, the degree to which information is *disputed*, the extent of *dramatization*, and the *symbolic* connotations of the information”.¹¹ I draw on the confirmation bias to add a fifth characteristic: reference to former experiences. As people tend to favor information confirming their opinions and existing prejudices, news appears reliable and informative as long as it is consistent with one’s original beliefs, while contrary evidence tends to be dismissed as unreliable or just does not get attention.¹² Furthermore, the reader or audience will complement any lacking information in the story by pre-existing feelings, knowledge, experience or opinion. Through reference to former experiences, media coverage can thus tap into or activate a narrative framework by which the audience will make connections between otherwise independent events. By adding

“former experiences” as an analytical attribute, I aim to show how Kasperson’s four factors are insufficient in explaining the different reaction to both incidents.

This article draws on a comparative, qualitative content analysis of representative newspaper coverage for two food safety incidents.¹³ The main corpus consists of the coverage of both cases in *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and their weekly news magazines: *Shukan Asahi* and *AERA* related to the former and *Yomiuri Weekly* to the latter. For a period of 30 days after the first mentioning of the incidents, I analysed the data in terms of volume and content characteristics.¹⁴ The selected corpus was worked through, keeping track of common re-emerging themes such as the personal details of the culprit or the potential scope of the scandal. I grouped these themes in broader conceptual categories¹⁵ such as ‘fear’, ‘implications’ or ‘national context’ and assigned them one or several of the content-related analytical categories: (1) dramatization, (2) dispute, (3) symbolic meaning, and (4) former experiences. In order to reconstruct the narrative of the incidents, I compounded this corpus with wider media coverage on both issues over time.

I selected the center-right conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the more left-liberal *Asahi Shimbun* -both national dailies ranked first and second in circulation, accounting for respectively 10 and 7 million copies per day-,¹⁶ guided by the consideration that quality national media function as agenda-setters in public debates as they convey relevant knowledge and political positions.¹⁷ The particular Japanese media landscape, however, distinguishes itself from that in other highly developed societies in the way it empowers traditional players. According to data from 2015, 80% of the Japanese households still read newspapers daily, and these retain high editorial credibility.¹⁸ Adding to their relative power as agenda-setters and investigative watchdogs, newspapers are considered the most authoritative and trustworthy source of information in case of a food emergency, before government agencies and ministries.¹⁹ Moreover, the Japanese media works with *kisha kurabu* (press clubs), which directly link reporters to their subjects of focus i.e. governmental bodies or large firms, but also affect the impartiality of the reporter.²⁰ These clubs, the level of authority of

the traditional media, and their high sales numbers define a communications environment that is different from other industrialized countries. Nevertheless, since the Triple Disaster in March 2011, the failure on behalf of both the authorities and the mainstream media to provide trustworthy information during and after the crisis have affected their credibility.²¹

Food safety, self-sufficiency and imports in Japan

Since the turn of the century, Japan has faced a series of food-related scandals, involving both domestic and international companies. The string of incidents brought to light not only a failing regulatory system, but also the country's vulnerability in terms of food self-sufficiency, import dependency and a declining agricultural sector. Japan's food self-sufficiency level went from a ratio of 79% in 1960 to 39% in 2016, the lowest among major industrialized countries.²² Since the end of the nineties, a rapid rise in agricultural imports resulted in a declining domestic agriculture, leading to protective measures and import restrictions by the regulatory authorities.²³ Moreover, the radioactive contamination of parts of the domestic food supply since the Triple Disaster of March 2011 put even bigger strains on Japan's food self-sufficiency levels and its farmers.

Against this backdrop, governmental programs emerged in the early 2000s.²⁴ Promoting the 'traditional Japanese diet' of rice, miso and vegetables, they aim at reducing Japan's import dependency, protecting domestic agriculture and subtly safeguarding the position of the agricultural establishment. The predominant food culture stresses locality and links this with assured purity and safety.²⁵ The risk related to domestically produced food is downplayed and opposed to the risk posed by foreign food.²⁶ While not unlike many other developed countries,²⁷ the situation is more extreme in Japan. Scholars like Kimura, Kojima, Reiher and Takeda demonstrated how the juxtaposition of pure-domestic versus impure-foreign manifests itself in a culinary nationalism: Japanese cuisine as a marker of national identity and prestige. In face of increasing globalization, consuming domestically produced foods reaffirms *Japaneseness* and could thus be considered one's patriotic duty.²⁸

Although this nearly state-engineered food nationalism is aimed at all imports, “Chinese products are believed to be least safe”.²⁹ This fear of Chinese imported foods gave the Japanese government exactly the impetus needed for their national movement promoting locally produced goods and a healthy lifestyle.³⁰ Immediately after the incident with Chinese *gyōza*, former Foreign Minister Tarō Asō said: “I’ve been saying that Japanese agricultural products are expensive but taste good and are clean and safe. To be blunt, the agricultural cooperatives should thank China. Great value has been added [to Japanese products]”.³¹ Yet, China - the “supporting pillar of the Japanese dining table” - ³² provides the main share of the Japanese food consumption: 31% of the imported food come from China, while almost half of all frozen vegetables, and more than half of the fresh vegetables Japan consumes are Chinese.³³ Food from China thus represents a double threat to Japan: it is not only mistrusted in terms of food *safety*, but also indispensable for Japanese food *security*.

But are Chinese imported products really increasingly ‘risky’? Official statistics show that between 2004 and 2015 the import volume of Chinese products in Japan rose by 46%, but the amount of food safety violations of that volume over the same period dropped with 66%, despite rising controls.³⁴ This gap between public perception and statistics puts into question the dominant narrative of risky Chinese food imports. This is, among others, related to a progressively negative image of China in Japan. Sentiment towards China has hardened since the late 1990s due primarily to a range of historical and security issues. In particular since the mid-2000s, the “China Threat” thesis (*Chūgoku kyōi*), a discourse which represents China as an increasingly aggressive economic and military threat, has had major implications for bilateral relations and mutual public opinion.³⁵ In 2007, the Cabinet Office opinion poll revealed that 63,5% of the Japanese respondents felt no affinity towards China.³⁶ At the time, even before the *gyōza* incident, a headline in AERA magazine read ‘The origin of our China-hate. It all started with poisoned foods!’, demonstrating the easy link between food safety and bilateral relations.³⁷ In 2011 still, the Japan-China Joint Opinion Poll

revealed that 78,3% of the respondents felt no or little affinity to China, for which the second reason are doubts towards the Chinese government's dealings with food safety issues.³⁸

Nevertheless, at the moment of the dumpling incident, Sino-Japanese relations were on the up. The administration of Fukuda Yasuo (LDP, 2006-07) had been trying hard to improve the strained bilateral ties with China, but met resistance from its own party, the opposition and the public. Years of China-bashing in Japan, anti-Japanese protests in China, and a list of unresolved and controversial issues had fuelled resentment towards China, which was easily exploited by hardliners striving for a tougher policy against China. Both Paul O'Shea and Sheila Smith, who approached the dumpling incident from an international relations perspective, argue that this was a major factor in the government's cautious diplomatic stance on the issue.³⁹ Nonetheless, the government found itself confronted with public hysteria and mass panic regarding Chinese imports. O'Shea underlined in particular the indirect framing of the incident in terms of the China threat thesis, the pre-existing antipathy against China among the public and the glorification of domestic produce. Nancy Rosenberger pointed at the saturation sensationalized media coverage, turning the issue into a major national news item while exposing larger social issues such as gender and social inequalities.⁴⁰ Focusing on the role of social trust in the public reaction to a food scare, Miyoshi Emako called for a greater sense of responsibility on the side of media in their reporting.⁴¹ In a comparison with the domestic Fukushima accident, Cornelia Reiher demonstrated how the media and other actors 'spatialized' the external risk of the dumpling incident to China as a whole, whereas the domestic radiation risk was confined to the affected prefectures.⁴²

The studies cited above all demonstrate that media bias, bilateral relations and Japan's precarious food situation are key factors in guiding this public perception. Drawing on Reiher's and O'Shea's approach, I compare the Chinese dumpling incident with a domestic case, introducing a strikingly similar yet so far unexplored, domestic incident. The similarity of the two cases allows for a comparison along defined attributes, which highlights divergences in coverage and context that can

account for the differing risk construction in the specific Japanese media landscape. Firstly, the study hopes to increase insight in the concrete processes of risk amplification by the media, both empirically (by exploring a new case) and theoretically (by suggesting a fifth factor to Kasperson's framework). Secondly, it aims to contribute to the field of foodways by enhancing the general understanding of negativism related to imported or Chinese foods in countries beyond Japan. Acknowledging that the Japanese case in itself cannot provide generalizable findings, the study can nevertheless be instructive to other contexts in which dependence, bilateral tensions and food risk perception interact.

Double standards of perception in Japan: two deliberate contamination cases

The media response to both incidents addressed in this paper proves to be dramatically different. In order to expose where and how the media's construction of the risk varied, this section addresses both cases in a parallel fashion: an introduction of each incident is followed by a summary of the newspaper's main foci. Next, I analyse the coverage along the content-related categories of increased concern (the attribute *volume* is addressed in the comparison). Finally, a comparison of both cases illustrates how the media became a social amplification station in one case, controlling the construction of a certain risk event into stigmatized proof of threat, and not in the other.

The 2008 poisoned dumpling scandal

Between October 2007 and January 2008, complaints about the smell and packaging of frozen dumplings (*gyōza*) surfaced in different regions of Japan. Only by the end of January 2008, when a family of five fell severely ill after consuming pork dumplings, the link between the different complaints and victims was made. It transpired that in all, ten Japanese citizens had been hospitalized after eating dumplings, which had all been sourced from China through the same importer.⁴³ After investigation, it turned out that the dumplings had been deliberately tainted with a highly poisonous

insecticide. However, the site of contamination remained unclear, leading to mutual accusations by both countries. In August 2008, the Chinese government disclosed that the dumplings were likely contaminated in China. Only in March 2010, Lu Yueting, a temporary worker at the producing factory, was arrested. He was unaware of the destination of the dumplings, but wanted revenge due to changes in his working conditions. In January 2014, he was sentenced to life imprisonment in Beijing.

While the governmental reaction remained low-profile, the incident led to a national panic in Japan; almost 6000 Japanese visited doctors with supposed symptoms (yet none was confirmed as related to the particular dumplings).⁴⁴ Consumption of China-made foodstuffs declined by 30% shortly after the incident, although within months the rate recovered (except frozen, pre-cooked products, which never recuperated).⁴⁵ In order to calm public anxiety, the Japanese government announced various new food safety measures and more stringent quality control on Chinese food imports.⁴⁶ While not the only trigger, the incident also fastened the process towards the creation of the Consumer Affairs Agency, a governmental institution aimed at consumer protection. Despite the fact that Lu Yueting did not know the dumplings were to be exported to Japan, his cry for attention turned into a diplomatic issue between China and Japan. Bilateral visits were postponed, accusations uttered, and public opinion polls revealed a substantial downturn in mutual affinity.⁴⁷

Media representation: domestic food in response to the Chinese threat

Without a doubt, the media was a key factor in the risk perception related to the dumpling incident and its impact. During the investigative visit to Japan in February, Li Chunfeng, vice-director of China's Import and Export Food Safety Bureau, reacted emotionally: "I call on the Japanese media to trust the governments of both countries and to aim for objective reporting".⁴⁸ Because of the uncertainty surrounding the case and the late and uncoordinated response from the government, the media became a major source of information for the public and for many actors within the food system.

Despite the limited number of actual victims, saturation coverage followed. The media monitored the scandal with painstaking detail and the vast majority of articles reported negatively, on the damage and impact for the Japanese people. The representation in the media had two foci: the incident meant (1) a *terror* threat to *all* Japanese people, (2) coming from China, a country struck by major food safety problems.⁴⁹ Discursive labels and visual representations enforced this symbolic threat, resonating with public fears and popular anxieties.

As soon as the government informed about several related poisonings, headlines appealed to panic and concern through the use of words such as “anxiety” [*fuan*], “fear” [*kenen*], “worry” [*shinpai*] and “confusion” [*konwaku*].⁵⁰ Over 2,5 years of uncertainty passed between the discovery of the poisoning cases and the identification of the cause and culprit. This gap in information was quickly filled by coverage appealing to drama and heightened concern, the first analytical category. Although initially, the Japanese government kept repeating that there was no evidence that the dumplings had been deliberately tampered with,⁵¹ media coverage immediately constructed the risk related to the incident as emerging from an unpredictable danger: China. Without official evidence, Japanese journalists readily suggested the Chinese food safety authorities and factories to blame. “China” was put forward as the offender, thereby ignoring potential domestic culprits such as the Japanese importers and distributors, or the government- which (should have) monitored the food safety of imports.⁵² Instead, the media paid close attention to the actual victims and their symptoms, the number of people consulting doctors, and every new development or potential direction for investigation.⁵³

Besides adding to the drama, coverage reflecting the bilateral accusations also strongly appeals to the second analytical category, dispute. Many articles express vexation about the Chinese media coverage or public debate about the incident. A prominent column in the *Asahi Shimbun* indignantly quotes Chinese media outlets blaming the Japanese media for not being trustworthy and for stirring up the incident.⁵⁴ *Shukan Asahi* features China watcher and critic Miyazaki Masahiro who

subtly adds oil to the fire by citing local Chinese as saying: “Japanese people only have weak resistance. We, Chinese people, have antibodies. We don’t get sick of a little poison”.⁵⁵ The media stressed the deliberate aspect of the incident as morally unacceptable.⁵⁶ The magazines in particular enjoyed the crime scene setting (e.g. “Chinese murder food”)⁵⁷ and even published lists of “the main food poisoning incidents involving Chinese persons”⁵⁸ and “Fatalities due to Chinese products”.⁵⁹ Before the culprit and his nationality were even established, references to anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese public were repeatedly and openly implied as a motive in the weeklies.⁶⁰ One article lists anti-Japanese remarks found on the Chinese internet, suggesting for example that the incident was a Japanese fabrication [*netsuzō*].⁶¹

Before the incident, problems with imported Chinese foods had been topic of saturation coverage for years.⁶² The audience was quickly reminded of these earlier food problems involving China; enhancing concern through the analytical category of former references.⁶³ “A lot of people definitely thought ‘Again?’ [*mata ka*] rather than ‘No way?’ [*masaka*, indicating disbelief] upon hearing about the poisoned frozen *gyōza*”.⁶⁴ The Chinese food safety system was criticized, as one expert was cited: “The [Chinese] inspections have their limits. [...] [A]t the moment of export, only a few samples [*gokuwazuka*] are extracted and inspected.”⁶⁵ Meanwhile, I found little reflection on the Japanese food safety system, besides some indignation about the late announcement of the poisonings by the Japanese ministries.⁶⁶ A comparison with the Japanese import controls or with the inspection system for domestically produced goods is entirely missing.

The *gyōza* case was portrayed as a threat and terror to all Japanese people.⁶⁷ Despite the many references to former Chinese incidents, well-known *domestic* food terrorism precedents went overlooked.⁶⁸ In the 1980s, for example, the ‘Man with the 21 Faces’ terrorized Japanese food companies and the public by threatening to poison (and eventually poison) Glico food products. Glico was forced to recall and had a hard time reinstalling consumer trust. Years later, in 1998, a woman was found guilty of poisoning a pot of curry at a local festival in Wakayama, killing 4

persons. Ignoring the two domestic precedents, terror as such seems applicable only to threats coming from abroad.

Nakano Kōichi from Sophia University stressed the symbolic connotation of the incident, showing how China has “contaminated” Japan, a reliance that at one point may turn out to be “poisonous”.⁶⁹ The reporting easily fed into the Chinese food-bad/Japanese food-good dichotomy, and could appeal to a pre-existing anti-Chinese feeling among the public. AERA headlined “Full-scale landing of the Chinese foods panic in Japan” and presented the threat as imminent: “We all continue to eat poison”.⁷⁰ A map depicts the Tianyang company covering the entire country of China, from which arrows depart to all Japanese importers, visualizing the threat: China invading Japan.⁷¹ The media went as far as generalizing: the whole Chinese food system has safety problems,⁷² to which the overall solution is: buy and eat Japanese. As Reiher concluded, the coverage politicized the discursive boundaries between ‘safe’ and ‘hazardous’ areas of origin, and ‘spatialized’ the risk to all of China.⁷³

Without questioning the feasibility regarding supply or price, the media coverage of the *gyōza* case united the public behind one solution: *kokusan* [domestic produce], not only renowned for its safety and freshness, but also symbol of Japaneseness.⁷⁴ A consumer representative is featured, saying “Consumers should as much as possible adopt the ‘*chisan chishō*’ [local production, local consumption] approach through which they can feel safe and secure”.⁷⁵ The narrative went beyond merely eating safe domestic food, but symbolically linked ‘Japanese’ consumption with the protection of rural areas, traditional culture and even nostalgia for the vanished, idealized old days.⁷⁶

While the official rhetoric was cautious and subdued, the media thus suggested the link which the government could not make in face of bilateral relations: the promotion of Japanese-made foods and local cuisine, presenting a very nationalistic solution to this perceived risk of consuming Chinese food. In response to a threat by its “supporting pillar”, the media could thus tap into a negative

attitude regarding China among the public, symbolically uniting the nation into a revived sense of national identity, expressed by ‘eating Japanese’.

The 2014 Aqli poisonings

In 2009, the *Asahi Shimbun* published a large report entitled “The dinner table, one year after the *gyōza* incident”, focusing on consumer and producer responses since the dumpling scandal. Aqlifoods, a company specializing in processed frozen foods, is presented as they launched a product line of frozen foods containing only domestically produced ingredients, called “*Oishii Nippon*” [“Delicious Japan”]. However, six months after the launch, the company had to admit that price pressure made it impossible to stick to the national origins of the food products. Consumers interviewed in 2009 and 2010 expressed similar concerns: although they prefer domestically produced foods, facing a price three times higher than imported goods, the economic principle prevails.⁷⁷

Five years later, Aqlifoods turned up in the news again. In November 2013 the company had started receiving consumer complaints about products smelling like engine oil. At the end of December, when tests showed traces of the chemical pesticide malathion on the products, the company was forced to recall over six million of their products in Japan.⁷⁸ Approximately 2800 consumers visited the doctor with supposed symptoms but similar to the dumpling scare, the majority of these ‘victims’ mentioned in the newspapers were found *not* to have ingested malathion-contaminated foods.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, a drop in sales caused the mother company Maruha Nichiro to shut down the plant where the contamination was detected. At the end of January, police investigations found out that, again, a disgruntled employee, this time a Japanese man named Abe Toshiki, had deliberately poisoned the products as protest against his poor working conditions. On August 23, 2014, he was sentenced to 3,5 years of imprisonment.⁸⁰

331 ***Media representation: disbelief and harmful rumors***

332 Media coverage on the Aqlifoods poisoning focused on the details of the crime and the
333 offender. Rather than addressing the issue as a food safety incident, it was presented as an isolated
334 criminal act, solved by simply catching the villain. This particular presentation as a crime prevented
335 discussion about the domestic food system in crisis and attenuated the risk perceived from the
336 incident.

337 Similar to the dumpling case, there was initial uncertainty regarding the origins of the
338 poisoning. However, unlike the dumpling case, the incident was not much disputed.⁸¹ The initial
339 criticism was aimed at the company due to its late reaction (a product recall only six weeks after the
340 first complaints), its weak implementation of precautionary measures and for prioritizing its own
341 interests over consumer health.⁸² Once the offender was identified, all blame was leveled on him. As
342 with the *gyōza* case, media accounts focused on the minutiae of his crime, such as the tools used to
343 transport the malathion,⁸³ the suspected shifts and production lines of the contamination act,⁸⁴ and the
344 lunch breaks during which the culprit could have tampered with the products.⁸⁵ Colleagues were
345 interviewed to confirm his frustration with the low salary.⁸⁶ Besides his actual poisoning act, many
346 articles also focused on the criminal's personal life. Apparently, Abe liked beetles, motorcycles and
347 cosplay, a hobby often associated with a reclusive, obsessed subculture stereotype. A 14-year old
348 student is even quoted about the fame of the 49-year old Abe as a dressed-up manga character. Other
349 stories range from neighbors who were totally surprised, to an acquaintance mentioning how Abe
350 once had lost his temper after a traffic incident.⁸⁷ The question that remains unanswered and entirely
351 unaddressed in the coverage is whether Abe inspired his act on the dumpling incident from six years
352 earlier, the trial of which was concluded in Beijing precisely at the time when Abe was discovered as
353 culprit for the Japanese case.

354 Similar to the dumpling case, the deliberate aspect of the incident and the uncertainty related
355 to the crime were highlighted, adding to Kasperson's drama attribute. Again the coverage seemed to

focus on the actual number of reported cases and their precise symptoms in each prefecture.⁸⁸ However, unlike the Chinese case, throughout the period of uncertainty about the origin, culprit or motives of the poisonings, the coverage was remarkable for its near absence of references to fear and anxiety. The *Asahi Shimbun* coverage only had three articles carrying *fuan* [unrest] in their title, of which only one was related to food worries⁸⁹, while *Yomiuri Shimbun* merely had one headline containing *fuan*, referring to the culprit's unsure working conditions rather than consumer concerns.⁹⁰

Businesses were obviously hit in this case as well. Lists of the affected shops and retailers were published repeatedly (often with revisions after mistakes). Listing by name inevitably leads to so-called *fūhyō higai* (harmful rumors), referring to the primarily economic damage related to (supposedly baseless) stories. The coverage not only devoted considerable attention to this reputational damage but also expressed concern and sympathy for the affected businesses. A local retailer reportedly feared for the image of Gunma-produced foods, while another shop owner already noted a 3-5% decline in frozen products sales.⁹¹ The reputation of domestically produced foods in general was said to suffer from *fūhyō higai* as well. Nevertheless, the regulatory system and its implementation remain off the hook. The coverage mentions for example that the Aqlifoods were adulterated with an organic phosphorus pesticide – as was the case with the dumplings.⁹² However, despite tightened regulations on these pesticides for imports since the *gyōza* incident, no question was raised about the domestic food safety standards regarding this chemical.⁹³

The majority of the articles highlights precisely the *unimaginable* aspect, the disbelief of such a scandal hitting Japanese produce [*kokusan*] -reputed for its safety.⁹⁴ In a rare case of association between both incidents, a young mother is quoted saying: “We had just forgotten the Chinese dumpling scandal, and now a problem appears with domestic foods... I could not imagine this. What can we still believe?”⁹⁵ The safe reputation of domestic produce already assumes overlooking several domestic food safety incidents, but since the Triple Disaster, keeping up this construction of safe domestic foods as contrasted with imports has become even more challenging. Trust in governmental

food safety monitoring and the public discourse on domestic produce has shifted since 2011.⁹⁶ Moreover, was it really that unthinkable that something could happen to domestically produced foods? Beyond radioactive contamination fears, 2013 marked a year of food-related incidents for Japan, featuring several false labeling scandals by national producers. Although the string of food safety problems is occasionally mentioned,⁹⁷ the Aqli incident is not put within a broader context of structural domestic food safety problems or precedents, including the Triple Disaster.⁹⁸ In fact, by portraying the case as a criminal act rather than a food safety incident, questions about ensuring food safety or security did not surface.

Comparison

As two intentional food poisonings, most variables match except the country of origin of the contaminated products and the culprit. Regarding the five defined attributes of heightened concern, the cases align in terms of drama and –to a lesser extent– dispute, yet differ greatly in terms of volume, symbolic connotations and references to former experiences. Indeed, the difference in the volume of media coverage is remarkable: over a period of 30 days after the news broke, ‘only’ 420 articles (or 113 pieces if only counting national editions) covered the Japanese Aqli case in both dailies together, as compared to the 1571 articles (or 673 nationally) on the Chinese *gyōza* contamination. The substantial media attention devoted to the dumpling case can thus certainly account for the heightened concern.

More media attention leads to a negative response, and can result in consumer changes and other secondary impacts.⁹⁹ The media coverage on the *gyōza* case led to undeniable reputational damage concerning all Chinese foods, and to substantial income losses for local Chinese restaurants and importers.¹⁰⁰ Also the Japanese case resulted in reputational losses, but this time the media was

actually concerned about *fūhyō higai*, trying to control consumer reactions and limit the impact of the scandal.

The coverage on both issues is similar in terms of appealing to the attributes of dispute and drama: initial uncertainty and a crime scene led to allegations about the origin, offender and cause, while every new fact known about the incidents was discussed in detail. Both cases started off in doubt about what happened. In the Aqli case, soon little was left to dispute as all fingers pointed towards the company. In the dumpling case, the coverage left no doubt about the blame and cause being China, yet widely reported the mutual accusations on the diplomatic, investigative and public level, and as such enhanced Kasperson's dispute factor.

Surely, the 'newness', the uncertainty and the crime scene accounted for enhanced concern in both cases.¹⁰¹ Events with a 'dread' factor such as invisible, new and poorly understood risks are especially prone to amplification.¹⁰² Furthermore, crime, villains and victims are so-called 'media triggers' making it more likely for a risk issue to become a major story.¹⁰³ Because of the media's focus on dread and crime, the reasons behind the villains' actions went largely unnoticed. Abe's frustration with his low salary is only brought up as part of the reconstruction of his personality as a criminal, while Lu Yueting and his motives garnered even less media attention.

The dramatic attribute in both cases was thus very high, but focused on different aspects: the Aqli coverage dramatized a *crime* and a criminal, whereas the dumpling reporting focused on a *food safety* crisis. This shows that although in both cases Kasperson's 'drama' attribute was very apparent, their impact differed through the particular framing of this attribute – a food safety crisis versus a criminal case. This framing is largely decided by the precedents that are picked up: rather than choosing for domestic food terrorism scares, Chinese food safety incidents outlined the dumpling scare as indicative of a country with severe food safety monitoring problems. Portrayed as a case of external terror, the incident presented a continuous food safety threat to the Japanese public.

As the Aqli case was strikingly similar, one could have expected a similar fear or indignation about the *domestic* food safety system against the backdrop of other local food safety precedents, yet this was hardly voiced. This poisoning was depicted as an isolated criminal fact, which was solved by catching the culprit. Strikingly, AERA dedicates its only article on the Aqli case to food terrorism, yet overlooks the link with the 2008 dumpling incident.¹⁰⁴ Only five articles in the *Asahi Shimbun* and ten in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* bring up both cases in relation. Surprisingly, the link here is not the similarity between both cases, but the fact that the dumpling incident is the reason why Aqlifoods had implemented stricter food safety measures in 2008. This shows how both incidents not only developed in a different narrative framework, but were also not perceived as similar.

Symbolically, the coverage presented both cases as a threat to the Japanese sacred cow of domestic produce: the dumplings endangered it from the outside, Aqlifoods from within. Whereas the structural food safety problems of China were all too easily laid bare in 2008, the audience was not so directly reminded of the structural deficiencies of their own country's food safety framework, nor the series of food-related scandals bearing witness of this. Although the dire situation of Japan in terms of food security are not seldom brought up, the Japanese food safety system itself is rarely criticized.¹⁰⁵ The topic of food self-sufficiency takes up an ambiguous position in this: it serves as motivation and support to the solution of domestic consumption in the Chinese case, but is clearly avoided or even silenced by the *fūhyō higai* discourse in the second.

Conclusion

This article has traced the mediatized story of two strikingly similar deliberate food poisonings in Japan, one involving Chinese frozen dumplings, the other affecting domestic frozen foods. The tiny scale of the Chinese incident was disproportionate to the saturation media coverage, mass panic, consumer reactions, regulatory change and even diplomatic problems. Although the

government was cautious not to refer to a narrative framework of negativism towards China, media coverage recalibrated the potential harm resulting from the incident into a concrete food safety threat, indicative of an entire country having food safety problems. Through the reference to former experiences and symbolic connotations, the *gyōza* incident was shown to confirm pre-existing beliefs about China, a country against which Japan as a nation had to protect itself.

In comparison, the domestic poisoning case only received one quarter of the media attention, and did not result in institutional change or consumer prejudice, despite its slightly larger scale. Without appealing to a similar domestic narrative framework, the case was depicted as a crime rather than a food safety crisis, solved once the offender was caught. Media coverage did not provide an easy link with related precedents, domestically or internationally. Although drama characterized the coverage, the impact of the event was controlled by relatively limited coverage, lacking symbolic connotations or references to former food safety incidents. Without these, the media treated the Aqli case as an isolated, criminal act, devoid of its context of domestic food-related problems and broader societal issues such as labor conditions. Whereas the bilateral context readily filled in the remaining questions in the Chinese case, the narrative framework related to Japan's food safety and security situation (in particular after the Triple Disaster) is *not* suggested in the Aqli case and as such a debate on the Japanese food safety system is avoided twice.

By comparing these two cases, this article demonstrates how the media frames risks through links with prior events and contemporary issues. Enforcing this framing via discursive references and symbolic images that resonate with existing fears among the public, the media supported or eschewed established ideas or myths about food, risk and health. The *gyōza* coverage was a manifestation of culinary nationalism, focusing on a dichotomy between domestic, safe foods threatened by unsafe Chinese imports. The Aqli case did not fit within the same framework, nor did it provide an easy solution to the public as to how to protect themselves.

In both cases, the coverage under analysis was devoid of critical questions; not only of the motivations of the culprit or the vulnerable status of the victims, but also on broader issues as Japanese agricultural policy, self-sufficiency or food safety regulation. Although media coverage could have given momentum to a critical debate on the structural problems of Japanese food safety and security governance, or the labor conditions in the price-battling food processing industry, the references hereto are rare or entirely absent in both cases. Media coverage can be a key arena where policy choices and political responsibilities are negotiated,¹⁰⁶ yet in both cases the Japanese government and their policy were left out of range. Similar to concerns about the radioactive contamination of domestic agricultural produce since 2011, a critical debate on the Japanese food safety system is silenced by *fūhyō higai*,¹⁰⁷ while the narrative framework of domestic food safety problems in a post-Fukushima context is *not* suggested but even entirely avoided.

This comparison made clear that Kasperson's four attributes of enhanced concern do not suffice in *explaining* the different risk perception. Assuming that volume of coverage is a logical outcome of Kasperson's other three factors, both cases differed primarily in the symbolic connotations present in the reporting. However, the concrete and tangible interpretation of these symbolic tags was decided on by the interaction with the particular framing of each incident. This confirms the theoretical value of adding a fifth factor –referring to precedents- to the analytical attributes. This attribute not only refers to the framework in which the media situates a certain risk event, it also decides which kind of incident it is portrayed as; two aspects which proved quintessential to the differing portrayal of and public response to foreign and domestic food risk.

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 721 contamination. Man arrested. Anxiety about employment. “Early clarification”]. 27 January: 6.

722 *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2014c. “Nōyaku konnyū. Tantōgai mo dehairi jiyū. Abe yōgisha hōsōshitsu de tenken
 723 tantō” [Pesticide contamination. Free entrance also for non-responsibles. Suspect Abe in charge of
 724 inspection in the packing room]. January 27: 39.

725 *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 2014d. “Nōyaku konnyū chōeki 3 nen 6 getsu chisai hanketsu ‘shiryobunbetsu ni kake
 726 akushitsu’ [Pesticide contamination. 3 years 6 months jail imprisonment. A district court ruling for
 727 ‘lack of mature judgment and malignity ”]. August 8.

728 *Yomiuri Weekly*. 2008. “Mubōbi Nippon” [Defenseless Japan]. February 24.

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¹ Rosenberger 2009; Miyoshi 2009; Nakashima 2009; Walravens 2013; Reiher 2014; O’Shea 2015.

² Although the act of poisoning took place already at the end of 2013, the main media story broke in 2014.

³ Beck 1992.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Slovic 1987.

⁶ Kasperson et al. 1988.

⁷ Wilson et al. 2014.

⁸ Conrad 2001.

⁹ E.g. Henderson et al. 2014.

¹⁰ E.g. Frewer et al. 2002.

¹¹ Kasperson et al. 1988: 184.

¹² Slovic 1987; Gardner 2008.

¹³ Bernard and Ryan 1998: 611-614; Mayring 2000.

¹⁴ For both newspapers, I made use of their respective databases *Asahi Rekishikan* and *Yomidasu*, 31.1.2008-1.3.2008 (*gyōza*) and 30.12.2013-29.1.2014 (Aqli). Page numbers given in the references are the starting pages of the article.

¹⁵ Mayring 2000.

¹⁶ In comparison, the third national daily, *Mainichi Shimbun*, does not even reach a circulation of 4 million copies per day. Both dailies are also the two best-selling newspapers worldwide. Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association 2015.

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- ¹⁷ Henderson et al. 2014.
- ¹⁸ McCargo and Lee 2010: 241; Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association 2015.
- ¹⁹ MAFF 2007; Food Safety Commission 2003: 28.
- ²⁰ Seward 2005.
- ²¹ Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015.
- ²² MAFF 2017.
- ²³ George Mulgan 2006: 152.
- ²⁴ E.g. *shokuiku* (food education) or *chisan chishō* (local production, local consumption). For an inexhaustive list of current governmental campaigns, see ‘Japanese Food Promotion’, <http://www.maff.go.jp/e/>.
- ²⁵ Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 103-104.
- ²⁶ Kjærnes et al. 2007: 132-33.
- ²⁷ Bosbach et al 2014.
- ²⁸ Ferguson 2010; Kimura 2011; Kojima 2011; Reiher 2014; Takeda 2008.
- ²⁹ Jonker et al. 2005: 26.
- ³⁰ JETRO 2011: 35.
- ³¹ *Japan Times* 2008.
- ³² JETRO 2011.
- ³³ MHLW 2004-2015; JETRO 2011. These are the most recent detailed figures available by JETRO. The percentages are based on number of declarations, not on weight.
- ³⁴ MHLW 2004-2015. Also in comparison with many other countries, Chinese imports are subject to more controls. In 2015, over 10% of the Chinese imports were checked for violations against the Food Safety Basic Law, as compared to e.g. 5,8% of the South Korean imports, and 8% of the US imports.
- ³⁵ For more on Sino-Japanese relations, see Smith 2015.
- ³⁶ Cabinet Office 2008.
- ³⁷ Onami and Kawano 2007: 16-21.
- ³⁸ Genron NPO 2011.
- ³⁹ O’Shea 2015; Smith 2015.
- ⁴⁰ Rosenberger 2009.
- ⁴¹ Miyoshi 2009.
- ⁴² Reiher 2014.
- ⁴³ MHLW 2008c.
- ⁴⁴ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008e: 1; MHLW 2008b.
- ⁴⁵ Japan Frozen Food Association 2016.
- ⁴⁶ Sasaki 2009.
- ⁴⁷ Cabinet Office 2008.
- ⁴⁸ Gibbs & Mizuno 2008.
- ⁴⁹ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008j: 2; *AERA* 2008c: 14.
- ⁵⁰ I.e. *Asahi Shimbun* 2008d: 11; *Asahi Shimbun* 2008g: 29; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008c: 35; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008d: 1; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008f; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008k: 31.

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- ⁵¹ At that time, the hole in the packaging was not yet discovered.
- ⁵² Even the opposite was the case regarding importers and retailers: rather than questioning their role or responsibility, worries about the impact of the incident on the businesses was repeatedly mentioned. *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008a: 35; *Asahi Shimbun* 2008b: 1.
- ⁵³ I.e. *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008e.
- ⁵⁴ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008f: 2.
- ⁵⁵ *Shukan Asahi* 2008a: 18.
- ⁵⁶ I.e. *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008i: 35.
- ⁵⁷ *Shukan Asahi* 2008a: 18.
- ⁵⁸ *AERA* 2008a: 14.
- ⁵⁹ *Shukan Asahi* 2008a: 18.
- ⁶⁰ *AERA* 2008c: 14; *AERA* 2008d: 21; *Shukan Asahi* 2008b: 21; *Yomiuri Weekly* 2008: 24.
- ⁶¹ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008f: 2.
- ⁶² E.g. *Mainichi Shimbun* 2007; Onami and Kawano 2007. Not all of these have been one-sidedly “against” China. *AERA* for example brings up the responsibility of Japan in the problems related to Chinese imports, referring to a.o. the increasing yield pressure and the “outsourcing” of their use of antibiotics in food production. Also see Walravens 2017.
- ⁶³ *AERA* 2008a: 21; *AERA* 2008c: 14; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008a: 35.
- ⁶⁴ *AERA* 2008c: 14.
- ⁶⁵ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008b.
- ⁶⁶ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008a: 25; *AERA* 2008b: 23-24.
- ⁶⁷ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008e: 1; *Shukan Asahi* 2008b: 21; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008j: 18.
- ⁶⁸ Ivy 1996.
- ⁶⁹ Farrer and Nakano 2008.
- ⁷⁰ *AERA* 2008a: 21.
- ⁷¹ *AERA* 2008b: 23-24.
- ⁷² *Asahi Shimbun* 2008b: 1; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008b.
- ⁷³ Reiher 2014.
- ⁷⁴ I.e. *Asahi Shimbun* 2008h.
- ⁷⁵ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008g: 29.
- ⁷⁶ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008i: 13.
- ⁷⁷ *Asahi Shimbun* 2009: 11, 29; *Asahi Shimbun* 2010: 12.
- ⁷⁸ MHLW 2013; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2013a.
- ⁷⁹ I. e. *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014a; MHLW 2008a.
- ⁸⁰ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014d.
- ⁸¹ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2013b.
- ⁸² *Asahi Shimbun* 2013a: 35.
- ⁸³ *Asahi Shimbun* 2014f: 39.
- ⁸⁴ *Asahi Shimbun* 2014g: 39.

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- ⁸⁵ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014c: 39.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ *Asahi Shimbun* 2014f: 39.
- ⁸⁸ *Asahi Shimbun* 2014a: 29; *Asahi Shimbun* 2014b: 37; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2013d.
- ⁸⁹ *Asahi Shimbun* 2013b: 35.
- ⁹⁰ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014b: 6.
- ⁹¹ *Asahi Shimbun* 2014e: 39.
- ⁹² *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2013c: 27.
- ⁹³ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2014c: 39.
- ⁹⁴ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2013b: 27.
- ⁹⁵ *Asahi Shimbun* 2013a: 35.
- ⁹⁶ Stersndorff-Cisterna 2015.
- ⁹⁷ An exception is *Asahi Shimbun* 2013b: 35.
- ⁹⁸ Even the scandal-ridden history of Aqlifoods' original mother company Snow Brand Milk Products (*Yukijirushi*) is only mentioned twice during that first month of reporting. *Asahi Shimbun* 2013a: 35.
- ⁹⁹ Rowe et al. 2000.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008g: 39; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2008h: 34.
- ¹⁰¹ In an interview with the author in 2016, also Kojima Masami, a renowned food journalist for the *Mainichi Shimbun*, referred to the dumpling incident as Japan's first food terrorism case, explaining the heightened media attention.
- ¹⁰² Slovic 1987; Kasperson et al. 1988.
- ¹⁰³ Department of Health UK 1998.
- ¹⁰⁴ *AERA* 2014.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Asahi Shimbun* 2008c: 2.
- ¹⁰⁶ Kepplinger 2002.
- ¹⁰⁷ See Kimura 2016.