

I posted a short piece at Chinafile.org last week on China's food safety challenges. The occasion for the post was the arrest of 63 people in China for selling fake lamb meat made of rat, fox, and other meats. The "conversation" includes comments/responses from Isabel Hilton (ChinaDialogue.net), John Balzano (BU Law), Alexa Oleson (formerly of AP), and Jeremy Goldkorn (Danwei.org).

I've included my post in full below, but take a look at the Chinafile page for the full discussion.

The month my wife and I moved to Beijing in 2004, I saw a bag of oatmeal at our local grocery store prominently labeled: "NOT POLLUTED!" How funny that this would be a selling point, we thought.

But 7 years later as we prepared to return to the US, what was once a joke had become a useful market signal and part of an arsenal of strategies we hoped would limit the risks of encountering tainted food. We ate less fish, which might be raised in polluted waters. We bought vegetables and fruit at Jia Le Fu (Carrefour) or Wo Er Ma (Wal-Mart) on the theory that international brands might have stronger quality controls. We never drank water from the tap, boiled or not. But recent news of problems at Wal-mart, Nongfu Springs (a bottled water company), and a host of other places suggests just how unreliable our strategies might have been.

Media reports last week that 63 people had been arrested for selling fake lamb made out of rat meat were both shocking and utterly unsurprising. How bad had things gotten? In Nanjing (where I am traveling for work), a local news show interviewed a street vendor who confessed to selling fake lamb made from fox meat. "But no," he said, "I would NEVER sell rat meat." Fraud is so well developed that there are moral hierarchies within the world of tricksters and charlatans.

Even our heroes have been implicated. In Ruby Yang's excellent Oscar-nominated environmental documentary, *Warriors of Qiugang*, the protagonist - a farmer who fights an ultimately successful battle to halt cancer-inducing pollution from a local chemical plant - tells the camera in passing that he has sold tainted rice into the market because "what else could I do..."

As I write this, I have just left Nanjing's gleaming, new train station on a Chinese bullet train that is slicing its way through the lush green rice fields of Jiangsu Province at 307

km/h (about 185 miles/h). China, as we know, has been remarkably adept at building up the hardware to support its economic miracle.

But its software (regulatory, legal, moral, ethical) for managing the ever-growing risks in a rapidly changing society remains woefully inadequate. Perhaps this is just a symptom of China's current stage of development, and solutions are only a matter of time. That is what some people say, anyway.