

Investigating Food Quality, Safety and Sanitation in Chinese Detention Centers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

This study investigates food quality and sanitation practices in Chinese detention centers. Due to their isolated nature, Detention Centers are vulnerable to contagious disease outbreaks. The traditional design of many of these facilities, inspired by design philosophy of the 80s and 90s, exacerbate these risks, especially with a recent overcrowding of some detention centers. It follows the importance of food hygiene and sanitation within detention centers to reduce these risks and protect the health of detainees and staff. The Covid-19 pandemic prompted stricter hygiene protocols and architectural changes to future construction to prevent disease transmission, which highlighted these issues. However, research on food quality and safety within detention centers remains scarce, with studies indicating inadequate management of cafeteria operations, resulting in unsanitary and nutritionally insufficient meals. This study employs a qualitative case study of a detention center in Guangxi, using questionnaires and document analysis to assess current practices and identify areas for improvement. The findings emphasize the need for modern, adaptable designs and enhanced management practices to ensure the well-being of detainees and staff in Chinese detention centers.

Keywords: Food hygiene, nutrition, sanitation, detention center.

1. Introduction

The latest data released by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, there are roughly 2500 detention centers (*kanshousuo*) in China [1]. Detention centers are essentially institutions that detain criminal suspects who have been legally arrested or placed under criminal suspension [2]. Hence detention centers are fundamentally different from detention facilities (*juliusuo*) also called detention centers, and prisons (*jianyu*), which are all governed by separate laws and regulations. However, unlike for prisons, research into Chinese detention centers is rare, and there has been little exploration of the general food safety and sanitation protocols in real detention centers [3]. Detention centers especially are at risk of disease transmissions due to their design. Given that most have been constructed around the 1980s and 1990s, their size, equipment, and architecture are overly traditional, and cannot account for the growing population of detainees [4]. Issues such as flow lines crossing, and automated supervision put the safety of both detainees and detention center staff members at risk [4]. However, the two primary documents regulating "Detention Center Implementation Measures for the Detention Center Regulations of the People's Republic of China" and "Measures for the Implementation

of the Regulation on Detention Facilities" (shortened as "Measures for Implementation"), which is based on the Custody Regulations of the People's Republic of China, clearly stipulates the cleanliness and sanitation of facilities as well as food safety. Furthermore, there has been academic discussion over whether the "Custody Regulations" itself contains a comprehensive enough regulation over basic living conditions and sanitation [3].

This study investigates food Safety and sanitation in Chinese detention centers through a qualitative case study of a detention center in Guangxi. The study will qualitatively observe the real-life procedures into ensuring food safety and hygiene in detention centers using questionnaire as well as document analysis. The research question of this paper is how Chinese detention centers ensure food safety and sanitation.

2. Literature Review

The food and sanitary conditions inside detention centers has not been extensively studied [3]. On the one hand, healthcare and emergency resuscitation of detainees inside detention centers has been established as a focus in the 1990 revision of Custody Regulations with the 26th regulation, "A detention center must be equipped with the medical devices and common medications required for

daily medical treatment and emergency care. Detainees who fall ill should be treated promptly. If their condition is serious and requires hospital care, they should be sent to the hospital for treatment in a timely manner.” Later, media coverage over detention centers increased regulatory precision [5].

The conditions inside detention centers have also changed in recent years. According to statistical data from 2017-2023 China Statistical Yearbook Statistical yearbook of China on the overall number of arrest decisions by the Procuratorate has relatively decreased, the overall number of detainees within detention centers has remained high. The problem of overpopulation within detention centers has threatened the safety and health of those within [4]. Hence, while the threat of Covid-19 has subsided, numerous proposals of changes to Detention Center organization have been made [6].

Issues with the lack of updating Measures for Implementation and Custody Regulations restrict the ability to ensure safety and health of detainees [7]. Both Measures for Implementation and Custody Regulations do not align with the updates to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Criminal Procedure Law. For example, even as the Criminal Procedure Law has been updated to refer to detainees as “detainees”, the Custody Regulations still refers to them as “criminals” over 70 times in its 2020 update, a term that in some contexts is viewed as more degrading. This lack of synchrony perpetuates stigmatization and weakens detainee rights.

2.1 Covid-19 Pandemic

Recent literature on safety and food hygiene in detention centers involve the Covid-19 pandemic. The enclosed design makes it especially vulnerable to breakouts of contagious diseases that threaten the health of both staff members and detainees [8]. The pandemic incited certain proposals to changes in detention centers. Wang proposed a four-layered change to detention center safety and hygiene [6]. The “safety fight” includes measures such as standardizing daily safety management through collective education, ensuring the routine use of face masks by detainees, and maintaining strict hygiene practices like daily disinfection of all areas within the facility. Additionally, the protocol emphasizes the importance of early detection of symptoms, with regular health checks and immediate isolation procedures for any suspected cases. Moreover, Wang also advocates for educational programs that provide detainees with scientific and comprehensive knowledge about pandemic prevention, which can help alleviate anxiety and promote a sense of safety.

Architectural deficiencies in Detention Centers also play a role in increasing health risks [4]. Detention Center devel-

opment is regulated by the Standards for the Construction of Detention Centers published in 2008, which has been criticized for prioritizing the legal aspects over actual architectural design [9]. This focus on legal conformity rather than on the actual needs of the facilities has led to issues such as overcrowding, which exacerbates problems like reduced living space and negatively impacts detainees’ health. Traditional designs often feature inefficient circulation paths, increasing security risks and complicating management. In response to the pandemic, facilities have implemented strict lockdown measures, including isolated work zones for police and remote interrogation systems to minimize contact. These challenges highlight the need for modern, adaptable designs that integrate technology and ensure both security and public health. Additionally, the standards have been criticized for failing to address the evolving requirements of administrative detention centers, particularly considering increasing detainee populations and the need for spaces that support both rehabilitation and conflict resolution [9].

2.2 Food Quality

Sun in his research found that around 69.9% of supervisory police officers reflected that the food budget for detainees in their region is 200-300 RMB per month, and 6.3% reported a budget exceeding 300 RMB [3]. In the same study, 90.3% of detainees said that they could feel full of their meals, while only 19.4% believed that what they ate was hygienic [3]. Lack of management scrutiny within Detention Center cafeterias over detainees’ meals cause them to be nutritionally inadequate or unsanitary food. Overall, refrigeration, ingredient sourcing, sanitation, and preparation of meals have in some cases proved health risk to detainees [10]. Scholars suggest better equipping Detention Centers for refrigeration, disinfecting, and pest control.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study will utilize a qualitative research design in order to produce authentic knowledge of food safety and hygiene practices reflecting the authentic experience of cafeteria workers in detention centers. The study will utilize a questionnaire, unstructured interview, and document analysis.

3.1 Sampling Methods

In order to ensure that sensitive data can be collected without participants dropping out of the study, the study will employ the convenience sampling strategy. Detention center are isolated spaces, where even visitation requires extensive planning [4]. Furthermore, the topic of detention centers as well as sanitation and hygiene are considered

sensitive information in China [8]. Hence, to maximize the availability of data, the researcher will contact an anonymous detention center A in Guangxi with which they are in personal contact with, and from which the data of cafeteria workers, and other data, can be collected as well. All participants will be currently working at said detention center A in Guangxi.

3.2 Data Collection

Questionnaires. Four cafeteria workers at detention center A will fill out a questionnaire separately and anonymously. The questionnaire will include demographic information about age and gender but no other revealing information about the participant's true identities. The questionnaire will last about five to ten minutes and be conducted wherever is convenient. The questionnaire will be printed out onto A4 sheets of paper and filled out physically by the participants. Each participant will be informed about the nature of study through an informed consent form printed in Chinese that shall accompany the printed questionnaire, which will inform that they can withdraw from the study at any point.

The questionnaire consists of four main open-ended questions which will include six questions in total. The first question is about the dining experience, the second food quality and safety, the third pest control. Within these, the first question will consist of two sub-questions, 1a) will be about the basic description of an average day's meal, and 1b) about the dining process. The second section will include three questions, 2a) will be about the procedures in the detention center for handling waste, particularly food waste, 2b) about the procedures for preventing contamination and spoilage, especially in terms of temperature control and packaging methods and how food storage is ensured to comply with regulatory standards. 2c) will be about the practices that are in place to ensure the sanitation of kitchen equipment and utensils. Finally, 3) the final section about pest control will consist of a single question about the strategies used to control pests such as rats and insects.

Interview. The interview is conducted with the director of detention center A through text messaging on wechat. The interview took place in an unstructured format and lasted about ten to twenty minutes. The participants were well informed of their identity protection. They were provided an informed consent form and also given the power to withdraw from the interview at any point during the interview.

Document Analysis. A document of the cafeteria's menu is collected from detention center A and compared with the accounts of participants in the questionnaire from section 1 to measure the accuracy of their statements as well as

the nutritional quality of the food provided in the detention center. For the purpose of data analysis, the document is saved digitally with any identifiable information erased. The original documents remain in the possession of the detention center.

It has to be acknowledged that the participants interviewed in this study are staff members, who have an incentive to exclude any health risks within the detention center to protect their positions. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants might be further inclined to portray conditions as more positive than they are. Procedures described by participants in the questionnaire might not be followed or followed below standards. Issues with food safety might not be reported, and hence the study cannot account for the subjective experience of meal consumption for inmates as well.

4. Ethical and Cultural Considerations

Because the study makes use of politically sensitive information in China, the study will prioritize the ethical and cultural considerations to protect participant's identities prevent any form of punishment or consequence to the participants.

First, each individual was informed of their anonymity in the study through an informed consent for their permission. Individuals were informed of the purpose of the study and that the information they provide will not directly offend the "discipline" of staff members. Furthermore, communication with the detention center has been conducted to ensure that the study design itself complies with the current political guidelines.

Second, there exists bias. The author is aware of potential bias being living in China. Hence, the author is aware of her own biases and pre-conceptions on Detention Center facilities. In order to maximize the objectivity of this research study, the research have chosen an unstructured interview research design and an open-ended question questionnaire in order to minimize researcher bias in the answers of the participants. To minimize bias, the study will ensure anonymity in the answers. Furthermore, the results of the study will be presented with minimal interpretation and will mostly include quotations and common themes.

Third, in terms of privacy and confidentiality, this study neither reveal personal information above the gender and age of the participants in the questionnaire, nor the specific name or location of the detention center studied. Although the study does not directly break the "discipline" of staff members, detention centers in general are considered politically sensitive topics in China, privacy is prioritized to prevent any potential repercussions. Data saved

digitally in the process of conducting the study, including photos, will be deleted after the study is completed. Wechat records will be deleted on the researcher's part, although chat data cannot be deleted fully.

Furthermore, the study is intended to maximize beneficence by expanding the publicly available data inside detention centers so that people have increased awareness of what to expect if they are themselves or know someone who will be going to a detention center. The study minimizes the maleficence by protecting privacy and complying the disciplines of detention centers to ensure that even if participants are identified that they will not be punished. All results will be reviewed by the supervisor the essay to ensure that there are no ethical breaches in the study.

Lastly, the paper complies with Chinese guidelines on discipline and political sensitivity. Being Chinese, the author is well educated in the cultural practices and values of China. However, the research seeks to avoid generalizations of detention centers regarding their perception inside China.

5. Results

5.1 Results of Questionnaire

As shown in Table 1, the answer to the first question "think about a typical day's meals in the detention center, including breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Please describe these meals. Provide examples of dishes you might see", included three mentions of eggs for breakfast, and two for *mantou* and rice noodles. For lunch, all four participants answered with one variation of fried pork. For dinner, there were four mentions of fried cabbage and pork. Two participants answered that little salt was used, one participant included that the food was hygienic and two that both meat and vegetables were included. Participants C and D also added that occasionally chicken drumsticks would be included as well.

For the second question, "please describe the process of dining in the canteen" participant A answered that breakfast begins at 7:00 to 7:20 with lunch at 11:00 to 11:20, and dinner between 17:00 to 17:20. All four participants included that meals are delivered individually to each cell and participant A included the fact that detainees wait until the supervision leader gives the order to begin eating. Participants A, B, and D included that utensils are collected after meals are eaten.

For the third question, "please describe the procedures followed in the detention center for handling waste, particularly food waste", participant A included that kitchen waste is not kept overnight. Participants A and D include that dedicated personal collect food waste. Participants B and C included that the rice water is collected and recy-

clad, with B including that it is sold to feed pigs.

The fourth question is "explain the procedures used to store food to prevent contamination or spoilage, especially in terms of temperature control and packaging methods. How do you ensure that food storage practices comply with regulatory standards". Participants A, C, and D mentioned the use of specialized refrigerators, Participant B mentions that ingredients such as grain, oil, and seasoning cannot be sourced from a source without "manufacturer, address, production date, or have an unclear origin." Participant C mentions that staff must undergo monthly health check ups and are only allowed to work if they have a valid health certificate. Participant D mentions that "ready-to-eat" items must be consumed within nine days.

Answering the fifth question, "what practices are in place to ensure that utensils and kitchen equipment are properly disinfected after each use", participant A wrote that dirty water is recycled through a specialized pipe. Participants A and B include that daily disinfection is conducted. Participant D wrote that disinfection cabinet disinfects kitchen utensils. Participant C wrote that irregular checks on sanitation are conducted by dedicated personnel, and if the health codes are violated the health license will be revoked. Further, sanitation will be logged.

Question six, "what different strategies are implemented in the detention center to prevent and control various types of pests, such as rats, insects, or other pests?", is answered by participant A including grain such as flour is sealed in closed containers. Participants C and D wrote about the use of mouse guard, and participant A added rat glue and mousetraps. Participant B wrote that there is a contract with a pest control company, which conducts monthly extermination of rats, flies, cockroaches and ants.

5.2 Unstructured Interview Results

Due to agreement between the interviewee, the interview will not be fully transcribed. The results of the interview will be summarized with chosen translated quotations. Regarding food, the interviewee added that detention center regulations do not allow for adding extra food at one's own expense. However, if the detainee is "sick, physically weak, or as a reward, they may receive extra food at no cost." To ensure the basic living needs of detainees, they are given "eight-piece set" upon entering the detention center, which includes "identification uniform, summer quilt (or cotton quilt), bowl and spoon, cup, towel, soap, slippers, toothpaste, and toothbrush." Furthermore, they are allowed to purchase certain daily necessities through a designated smart shopping platform. The suppliers are "selected through bidding, and prices discounted from market retail prices. "Monthly spending is limited to "400 yuan, no one has the right to buy more, and it is possible

to buy less or not at all.” The smart shopping platform is “similar to Taobao” but the developers have a cooperation agreement with the Public Security Bureau, allowing access to detainees’ shopping data. The data can be used to monitor detainees’ basic shopping behavior, which can be used to ascertain their current mindset.

All basic living necessities, including “eating, drinking, excreting” and “medical treatment”, are provided by the government, “no matter if its serious or minor illness,” such as “tuberculosis, high blood pressure, diabetes, and such.” However, staff members must pay their own expenses, which is a point of frustration amongst some.

5.3 Document Overview

The document consists of a weekly ingredient menu and an expenses diagram. For the weekly menu for July 2024, breakfast alternates between one steamed bun and egg per person and rice noodles approximately 121-181 grams and an egg. For lunch, there is always 60.4 grams of pork accompanied with either vegetables such as cabbage or carrots, and soy products, such as dried tofu skin, or both. For dinner, 60.4 grams of pork and a different selection of vegetables, such as potatoes or pumpkin.

6. Implications of the Research

The study explores the food quality, safety, and sanitation conditions within Chinese detention centers. It addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding the food quality, safety, and sanitation practices and conditions in Chinese detention centers. Although a significant number of proposals and regulations already exist, such as the Measures for Implementation and Custody Regulations, whether these guidelines are followed remains a question. Further, a lack of specific guidelines in the existing legal framework gives an incomplete picture of the actual practices followed inside the detention center. Hence, the research may provide valuable insight into the sanitation, nutritious, and hygiene conditions within these facilities. The study will also raise public awareness about the conditions in public centers.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, this study demonstrates how to ethically conduct research in China, respecting cultural norms while still uncovering important information. Due to the lack of available studies, the approach outlined in this study may serve as a model for future studies in similar contexts, ensuring that research is conducted with respect for participants’ privacy. The research may also prompt detention centers to reevaluate their current practices regarding food safety and sanitation, which could result in long-term improvements in management inside detention centers.

7. Conclusion

This study holds practical and theoretical implications as it explores the food quality, hygiene, and sanitation conditions within detention centers. Using a qualitative methodology, the study adds insight into the isolated institution of detention centers and the procedures and conditions inside it. Detention centers detainees are especially vulnerable to health risks and diseases. Given the gap in the literature exploring the actual food and sanitary conditions, it is important to explore the real conditions inside detention centers. The results of this data are especially significant in consideration of the context, as China and the world moves out of the Covid-19 pandemic, which have emphasized the need for higher alertness regarding food and sanitation conditions, especially for those in detention.

The study primarily studies the personal accounts of staff members on the food hygiene, quality, and sanitation of detention centers, acknowledging that there are various limitations to this approach. On the broader level, the study does not explore the accounts of detainees. Hence, the study is limited by the possibility of participant and social desirability bias in their accounts. Due to practical issues the sampling of the study only involves one detention center in Guangxi and involves only five participants. Gaining access to detention center staff members is difficult. Thus, the data collected in the study cannot be generalized to all detention centers in China, since loose regulations could lead to drastically different implementation policies.

Further research should be conducted to explore the personal accounts of detainees as well as expand the sample size to include more detention centers in different regions in China. Such exploration would create a fuller picture of detention center conditions in China, which is currently quite understudied.

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