

The Institutional Logic and Governance Effectiveness of Edifying Governance in Response to Oil Safety Crises: A Case Study of the Oil Tanker Mixed-Load Incident

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Abstract: Food safety is closely related to public health and well-being, and food safety-related public crises have sounded an alarm for the nation. Based on the recent mixed-loading incident involving oil tankers, this study constructs a "frontstage-backstage" analytical framework to explore the institutional logic and governance effectiveness of China's response to food safety crises from the perspective of edifying governance. The study finds that, under the backdrop of ambiguous responsibilities and regulatory gaps, local governments leverage their informational and alliance-building advantages to implement edifying governance in two stages, resolving the crisis while simultaneously achieving the goal of liability avoidance. However, resolving the crisis does not necessarily mean that the underlying problems are substantively addressed. Edifying governance may foster an organizational culture of inaction and self-protection, potentially leading to more severe public crises in the future.

Keywords: Edifying Governance; Food Safety; Public Crisis; Institutional Logic; Governance Effectiveness

1. Introduction

As the saying goes, "Food is the first necessity of the people, and safety is the first priority of food." Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the central government has attached great importance to food safety issues, proposing the implementation of a national food safety strategy to ensure that "safety on the tip of the tongue" is fully guaranteed, and to reassure the public about what they eat. However, China's food safety regulatory system remains generally weak, and the contradiction between a "large-scale industry" and "weak supervision" is particularly pronounced [1]. The path toward building a Healthy China remains long and arduous.

In recent years, frequent and difficult-to-manage food safety public crises in China not only reflect the complexity of governance but also expose possible issues in attitude toward problem-solving. In the recently exposed oil tanker mixed-loading incident, a Beijing News reporter revealed how oil tanker drivers bypassed multiple layers of oversight—government, enterprises, and clients—during the changeover of transported goods. Without cleaning the tanks, they directly loaded soybean oil after unloading coal-based oil, causing edible oil to be contaminated by chemical residues and triggering a major public opinion crisis online.

In response to the incident, local governments successfully defused the crisis through the use of edifying governance. However, whether the underlying issues related to oil safety were effectively addressed and whether long-term food safety can be guaranteed remains uncertain in the public's mind. Against this backdrop, this paper takes edifying governance as the analytical lens, aiming to explore the institutional logic and governance effectiveness of China's food safety crisis response through a case study approach, seeking to answer the above questions.

2. Case Description

The case description follows a four-stage narrative structure—onset, escalation, climax, and resolution. The main content is outlined below.

Onset: On July 2, 2024, Beijing News released a two-month investigative report on the mixed-loading practices of oil tankers. In May, reporters tracked two tanker trucks (license plates: Ji E5476W and Ji E6365Z) and found that in order to save costs, drivers skipped tank cleaning during goods changeover. After unloading coal-based oil, they immediately filled the same tank with soybean oil, resulting in contamination and posing a significant threat to public health. At present, bulk edible oil in long-distance transport is often in a semi-deregulated state, and the mixing of food-grade and chemical liquids without cleaning has become an open secret in the industry [2]. The report brought the issue of coal-based oil being mixed with soybean oil into the public spotlight, triggering widespread public concern and controversy on social media.

Escalation: The report implicated two edible oil enterprises: Huifu Grain and Oil Group and Sinograin Oils & Fats (Tianjin) Co., Ltd. Amid intense public scrutiny, on July 6, Sinograin issued a public statement asserting that based on initial investigations conducted on July 2, a comprehensive system-wide inspection was launched starting July 5. On July 8, a Huifu office representative stated that the company's "Huifu" brand oil was not affected and that the local authorities in Hebei were investigating the matter, with the company awaiting the official outcome [3].

Climax: On July 8, People's Daily Online published a sharp commentary on the incident, emphasizing the need for strict implementation of the highest standards, most rigorous supervision, toughest penalties, and most serious accountability to ensure the safety of the public's food [4]. This marked a new peak in public discourse. Subsequently, major media accounts leveraged the issue for online traffic, and the incident continued to be exposed in greater detail, heightening public panic. On July 9, the State Council Food Safety Commission convened a special meeting involving the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Transport, State Administration for Market Regulation, and other departments. A joint investigation team was established to thoroughly examine issues related to edible oil tanker transport, with a commitment to timely disclosure of investigation results [5].

Resolution: On August 25, the State Council Food Safety Commission announced the outcomes of the investigation into the "disorderly practices in edible oil bulk transport" reported by the media. Individuals and enterprises involved were subjected to administrative penalties, and relevant departments and their leaders were held accountable [6]. Additionally, on August 27, the Standards and Technical Department of the State Administration for Market Regulation issued a public call for comments on a proposed mandatory national standard titled Hygienic Requirements for Bulk Transport of Edible Vegetable Oil [7]. On September 3, the National Standardization Administration issued a formal notice to begin the formulation of this standard, which is scheduled to come into force on February 1, 2025 [8]. With that, the official handling of the incident came to a close.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article introduces the concept of performative governance to analyze the selected case. Performative governance is a product of the co-construction between state and society. It refers to the state's theatrical deployment of visual, linguistic, and gestural symbols in order to cultivate an image of good governance in the eyes of the public [9]. Just as theatrical performance is ubiquitous in literary life, performative acts are similarly pervasive in political society. The state consolidates its legitimacy through the creation of political spectacles; politicians orchestrate speeches to garner electoral support; government officials respond to public concerns through performative governance; and protestors engage in performative social movements to compel governmental recognition and legitimacy of their demands [10-17].

This suggests that performative governance necessarily involves at least two primary actors: the state as the performer on stage and society as the audience. When public expectations exceed the actual capacity of governance, the state may respond through performative governance. Yet mere responsiveness is insufficient—the state must also demonstrate responsibility, convey commitment, and ensure transparency through swift investigation and action [9]. A performative governance narrative is considered “complete” only when it delivers a relatively satisfactory resolution to the public [18].

However, the completion of a performative governance narrative does not equate to the completion of governance itself. In terms of effectiveness, performative governance stands in contrast to substantive governance. There is no doubt that performative governance serves as a policy tool for mitigating short-term crises. Although it may not resolve underlying issues, it temporarily strengthens public trust and expands the potential for long-term re-governance [19,20]. In some instances, even substantive

governance follows a performative logic, thereby facilitating political progression [21,22]. Public crisis governance, in particular, is a domain in which performative and substantive governance may coexist [23]. This is especially relevant in the area of food safety—linked to daily life and the wellbeing of the people—where governance outcomes directly affect national livelihood and public health. When performative narratives succeed, the shift in public attention may prompt substantive problem-solving. Conversely, when the performance is disrupted or collapses, it may deepen public disappointment and provoke more radical social movements [24-26]. At such moments, the question arises: can the state respond to a renewed governance crisis and restore public trust?

Focusing on the issue of edible oil safety in China, it is noteworthy that similar incidents involving the co-loading of edible oil and industrial chemicals in tanker trucks had already occurred in 2022 in Yueyang, Hunan Province. Government responses at that time mirrored current actions. Why, then, did the issue resurface two years later, now with greater difficulty and wider impact? This raises important questions. The dual dynamics of limited state governance capacity and societal burden of response appear to be only the surface-level drivers of performative governance. Situated within the Chinese context, what institutional logic and governance efficacy does this model truly exhibit? These questions remain for academic inquiry. Therefore, based on the concept of performative governance, this study constructs a “frontstage–backstage” analytical framework to examine the institutional logic underpinning China’s response to the edible oil safety crisis and to further assess its governance effectiveness.

In the interaction among actors, both competitive and cooperative performances exist, with the interplay of competition and collaboration shaping the implementation outcomes of performative governance [15-28]. Government officials occupy the role of performance agents between the state and the public, simultaneously bridging the frontstage and backstage. The terms frontstage and backstage refer to spatial metaphors derived from theatrical settings. The frontstage is a formal arena, visible and accessible to the audience, where direct interaction occurs. In contrast, the backstage is more concealed and flexible, allowing for improvisation and retreat. Each actor designs and executes actions according to their role and positionality within these spatial realms. The frontstage reflects the intentions of the backstage, while backstage arrangements influence frontstage presentation. Importantly, these terms are relative rather than fixed locations. Actor positioning and interrelations should be determined based on the specific issue at hand and the involved populations.

The differentiation and coordination between frontstage and backstage contribute to the reorganization of governance elements, jointly constructing an adaptive response to the current crisis [29]. The logic of action among these actors may reveal the institutional logic underlying China’s governance of the edible oil safety crisis. Accordingly, an analysis of the governance process and outcomes may further illuminate the efficacy of performative governance in China’s public crisis management.

4. Case Analysis

In the edible oil industry chain, from production to consumption, edible oil is primarily sold in two forms: packaged and bulk. The former involves companies directly packaging the oil into drums and selling it to consumers under their own brand through channels and distributors. The latter involves selling oil in bulk to customers, typically small and medium-sized edible oil repackaging factories, or large-scale food processing and catering enterprises. Edible oil transported in tank trucks and picked up by customers is considered “bulk oil.” In recent years, due to the dual pressures of an economic downturn and industry saturation, profit margins in oil transport have been severely squeezed, which has inadvertently led some drivers to engage in opportunistic behaviors, such as mixing different oil products. Meanwhile, local government departments have been too overwhelmed to address the issue, and the lack of technological means for detection has resulted in weak regulatory enforcement. The involved enterprises also prefer to avoid additional trouble, assuming that as long as the quality of the oil is guaranteed, they are not responsible for the transportation process once the oil leaves the factory. Often, customers are unaware of this issue, typically only engaging in a simple exchange of money for goods. This situation has allowed such opportunistic behaviors to spread across the industry, with various interest groups tacitly acknowledging the practice, turning it into an open secret within the sector. However, as the saying goes, “Walls have ears.” This was proven when investigative reporting by The Beijing News revealed the previously unknown industry secrets, sparking an immediate public outcry.

This crisis unfolded primarily in cyberspace, without triggering large-scale protests. Once the incident was exposed, the media’s amplification effect led to a significant erosion of public trust in food safety,

even sparking panic and calls for government accountability [30]. The pressure on the government to be accountable stemmed mainly from public complaints and media oversight, with the intensity of this pressure being influenced by the volume of complaints and the level of media scrutiny [31]. At the outset, public discourse mainly occurred between media bloggers and the public, with the situation still under control. The local government and the involved enterprises hoped to manage the issue through a “wait-and-see” approach and did not respond promptly. After nearly four days of escalating public debate, the local government and the enterprises eventually began to issue responses. The former declared that it would “launch an investigation and deal with the matter according to the law,” a statement that was, in fact, a form of bureaucratic rhetoric, primarily aimed at avoiding responsibility. The latter stated that they had “launched a self-inspection and would actively cooperate with the investigation” and that “the quality of the company’s oil was flawless,” in essence shifting the blame onto individual drivers. At this stage, the “frontstage” performance logic may have been influenced by historical path dependencies, power imbalances, and information asymmetries, where the local government and the enterprises’ ability to control public opinion was still strong enough to withstand the pressure of accountability, hoping to obscure the situation through inadequate performances.

However, once authoritative state media, such as People’s Daily, became involved, this illusion was completely shattered. This signaled that not only the public but also the state required a response.

The intervention of state media raised new demands for the performance of the local government and the involved enterprises. At this point, the leadership of the crisis management process had shifted from the local government and the involved enterprises to higher-level government bodies. The State Council’s Food Safety Office, alongside multiple ministries, formed a special joint investigation team, leveraging top-down political momentum to resolve the crisis quickly. The “frontstage” performance evolved from verbal responses to formal commitments and actions. After an investigation lasting nearly a month and a half, the State Council’s Food Safety Office issued a report on the investigation and resolution of the incident, administering administrative penalties to the involved individuals and enterprises, holding relevant departments and their leaders accountable, and providing a public explanation on behalf of the state. This action effectively fulfilled the initial commitment made by the government.

However, what was presented was merely the “frontstage” performance, a relatively complete narrative of “performative governance.” It is noteworthy that the state began to push for the revision of the Sanitary Requirements for Bulk Transport of Edible Vegetable Oils to make it mandatory, aiming to standardize industry practices through national standards. This approach made the “performative governance” of this stage appear more advanced and covert, ultimately winning back public trust.

However, the conclusion of the “front-stage” performance often causes the public to overlook the hidden “back-stage” actions. Many of the subtle maneuvers in the “back-stage” are difficult for the public to detect. Under the high-pressure accountability of the higher-level government, local governments and the involved companies form a performative alliance, motivated by various factors, including but not limited to self-interest, altruism, and genuine commitment to social justice [30]. The specific nature of this alliance remains unclear, but its outcome is that the local government and the involved companies manage to navigate the situation relatively smoothly, as reflected in the following details. First, the administrative penalties mainly target the drivers and the heads of the transport companies. Although their actions are classified as “illegal and criminal,” no criminal responsibility has been pursued as of now. Second, the administrative fines imposed on the two major involved companies were approximately 2.86 million RMB for Sinograin Oils (Tianjin) Co., Ltd. and about 2.51 million RMB for Hebei Sanhe Huifu Grain and Oil Group Refining Co., Ltd. Compared to the fines imposed on other companies, such as 300,000 RMB and 260,000 RMB, these amounts seem significant. However, Hebei Sanhe Huifu Grain and Oil Group Refining Co., Ltd., as a private company, had a revenue of 66.719 billion RMB in 2023, while Sinograin Oils (Tianjin) Co., Ltd., a state-owned enterprise fully owned by Sinograin Group, has already exceeded 40 billion RMB in revenue as of 2024. Although the tax data is not available, it is evident that the nominal fines of over two million RMB are minimal in the context of their revenues, resembling the lightest of symbolic penalties. Moreover, the official report does not mention the companies’ corrective actions. Third, regarding the investigation and handling of the case, the announcement mentions accountability for the relevant departments and responsible leaders, but the specific details of these measures have not been disclosed. Given that the investigation lasted nearly one and a half months, the issue should have been clear by this time. The fact that this has not been publicly addressed raises questions about whether any substantial accountability has been enforced, which is disappointing. Fourth, the official website of the relevant local government departments shows that the information about the penalties is no longer available, further reinforcing suspicions of concealment. Lastly, although the government has initiated the revision of the “Hygienic Requirements for Bulk

Transportation of Edible Plant Oils" and is moving toward mandatory enforcement, the actual effectiveness of these measures remains uncertain. Moreover, the entire handling process of the incident appears to address only the immediate crisis and does not provide a long-term solution. Relying solely on the enforcement of one standard cannot fully resolve the issue. If similar problems arise again in the future, both the government and businesses may resort to similar performative governance tactics. However, can the public's health continue to bear such consequences?

In summary, in this incident, the media acts as the main intermediary connecting the "front-stage" and the "back-stage," impacting both the quality and effectiveness of the "performative governance" implementation. In the first phase, in response to the public's disapproval from the "back-stage," the local government and the involved companies openly played their role in "quelling the matter" without concealing their intention, confidently performing poor acting. In the second phase, with the involvement of state-run media, the central government became both the actor on the "front-stage" and the audience in the "back-stage." At this point, the local government's and the companies' intertwined interests deepened, forcing them to provide performative responses for the "audience," such as symbolic fines, unclear corrective actions, and ambiguous accountability. The key to this "performative governance" lies in the interaction between the "front-stage" and "back-stage." On the "front-stage," the local government and the involved companies are in a "performance competition" relationship, representing the governing and the governed. On the "back-stage," however, they engage in "performance cooperation," forming an alliance. Since image management is an information game—where information equals power—the asymmetry of information leads to exclusive power, forming a "privileged alliance" between the local government and the involved companies, which facilitates "performative governance" [26-33]. Furthermore, due to China's centralized system, which struggles to address the "politics of scale" arising from large production systems and geographical scope, along with the limited capacity of public participation in governance, this gives performative governance a space for legitimacy [34]. Although the public, after the incident, spontaneously formed a collective, internal disagreements emerged within this organization. While the broader public sought solutions to the incident and the underlying food safety issues, a few media bloggers seemed more focused on capitalizing on traffic, resulting in both sides issuing statements in the media but lacking a representative appeal or collective action. This inability to form a unified force led to a passive acceptance of the situation, akin to "punches on a sandbag." In the end, the "performative governance" approach merely dealt with the immediate crisis, without addressing whether such food safety issues would be substantively resolved.

Therefore, the entire event demonstrates that in addition to industry-wide unethical behavior stemming from rational economic actors and information asymmetry, the absence of minimum quality standards, the selective enforcement by local governments under a pressure-driven system, and the passive collusion between enterprises and regulators, as well as the lack of accountability, are key inducements for food safety crises governance in the Chinese context [35,36]. When facing a food safety public crisis, the government primarily relies on movement-style governance to defuse the situation, emphasizing "regulatory order" while neglecting "food safety" [37,38]. Furthermore, after the crisis is resolved, the focus does not shift to routine regulatory practices leading to recurrent food safety crises that remain unresolved [39].

Since the reform and opening-up, China's food safety regulation has undergone a transformation from a highly centralized system at the national level, and excessive decentralization at the local level to a collaborative regulatory approach, presenting a regulatory landscape characterized by both competition and cooperation [36-43]. However, in the face of the overlapping responsibilities of territorial and vertical management, vertical regulatory agencies possess authority but lack the capability, while local governments have the capability but lack the authority. The unclear division of regulatory powers, responsibilities, and financial rights leads to regulatory ambiguities, which in turn results in a situation of residual responsibility and regulatory failure [44]. Clearly, in the alternating process of centralization and decentralization, both from the perspectives of authority and responsibility and from the perspective of functions, previous regulatory system reforms have been incomplete, with unclear powers and responsibilities and regulatory deficiencies forming the institutional background for this incident and, more broadly, for China's response to public food safety crises [45].

In public crisis response, performance-oriented incentive mechanisms primarily rely on negative performance (dereliction of duty and its consequences) to hold officials accountable, rather than positive rewards [46]. With the rise of the administrative accountability system in China, the accountability of officials based on negative performance has become the main means to drive the implementation of policies across various fields [47]. Consequently, the behavior of government officials has gradually shifted from seeking credit in the early stages to avoiding responsibility in more recent times [48]. Under

a pressure-driven system, local governments are overloaded with tasks and must make selective choices regarding policy execution. In the context of regulation, local governments need to reallocate their regulatory attention based on the strength of the correlation between regulatory matters and safety risks, as well as the pressure from higher authorities [49]. Compared to public crises such as natural disasters or accidents, food safety public crises are clearly less urgent. For instance, in the case of typhoon disaster management, officials' performance in fulfilling their duties tends to be significantly higher than in food safety crisis management [50]. This disparity is evident. Furthermore, although officials involved in food safety incidents are constrained by their negative performance during crises when reassigned, they face fewer consequences than those involved in other types of public crises [51]. Therefore, given the historical path dependency, limited governance resources and attention, and varying levels of crisis severity and accountability pressure, food safety regulation is inevitably overlooked. After a food safety public crisis occurs, local governments inevitably adopt a strategic approach, and crisis management becomes the main form of strategic response. In the face of dual pressures to respond to public opinion and higher-level accountability, "performance-based governance" becomes an effective response for local governments, often resulting in collaborative performances between the government and enterprises or within government departments, collectively providing a formal, performative response to higher authorities and the public, thus resolving the crisis. This institutional logic shares similarities with the governance logic of the Chinese Empire, as described by Mr. Xueguang Zhou using three conceptual pairs: "delegation and agency," "formal and informal," and "nominal and real," particularly emphasizing the core role of the transformation between formal and informal systems [52].

However, the resolution of a crisis does not equate to the effective solution of the underlying problem. While "performance-based governance" leaves ample room for remedial action, the success of its narrative often erroneously strengthens local governments' perception of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the actions taken, perpetuating harmful behavior under the guise of activism, and failing to implement substantive reforms [53-54]. In this atmosphere, the fear of accountability and the desire to avoid responsibility suppress the long-term progress of governance, making inaction and self-protection increasingly entrenched. The result is that such shallow, symbolic, and self-deceptive performances not only fail to bring about substantial change in addressing the problem but also foster a culture of complacency within organizations. In such a culture, performance is mistakenly seen as a "genuine progress". This strengthens prevailing power structures, exacerbates social inequality, and hinders the realization of social fairness and justice [55,56]. The above analysis suggests that although "performance-based governance" may help resolve issues in certain situations, the organizational culture it generates may impede substantial solutions to problems and potentially lead to more severe public crises in the future. The dual nature of "performance-based governance" reflects its effectiveness in crisis management. Therefore, in addition to improving transparency and communication, as well as enhancing regulatory oversight and accountability, it is essential to foster a healthy organizational culture to prevent the adverse consequences brought about by performative behavior [55,57].

5. Policy Implications

Performance, much like theater, can delight or repulse—this metaphor aptly captures the two sides of "performative governance." It is not inherently detrimental; indeed, numerous studies have highlighted its potential benefits. However, within the Chinese governance context, performative governance is often associated with undesirable outcomes. This is largely due to its entrenchment within bureaucratic and formalistic cultures, which it in turn reinforces, thus detracting from substantive problem resolution.

Nevertheless, the very outbreak of a public crisis underscores the urgency of addressing underlying problems. Performative governance may serve as a temporary strategy for governments to defuse crises, but it must never be used as an excuse for delaying real solutions. Food safety concerns, though not always immediately visible in their health impact, carry the potential for grave consequences. Should the situation deteriorate, any delayed response may prove catastrophic.

Therefore, in responding to public crises, even if performative governance is employed, it must be closely integrated with substantive governance efforts. Mere performance cannot deceive the public—only meaningful and effective resolution of problems can earn public trust.

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