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Original Paper

The Multiple Streams Framework in the Context of China's Policy Agenda—An Examination and Refinement Based on the Policy of Special Food Safety in Online Sales

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Abstract

Drawing on the policy agenda practice of the "Guidance on Compliance for Special Food Safety in Online Sales," this study aims to examine the applicability of the Multiple Streams Framework in the Chinese context and to make necessary refinements to it. The findings show that focusing events play a crucial role in the formation of the problem stream; decision-making bodies with clearly defined divisions of powers and responsibilities are the core driving force of the policy stream; and the push from interest groups, together with the ruling party's ideology, constitutes an indispensable key factor in the political stream. In addition, the three streams are intertwined and interactive with each other along the temporal dimension, with the political stream occupying a dominant position, while the media acts as a bridge that facilitates the interaction among the three. Notably, by opening a "policy window," Party and government leaders play a pivotal role in advancing the policy agenda, and the opening of this window possesses a certain inevitability, reflecting the urgency and irreversibility of temporality in the process of political mobilization and decision-making.

Keywords

Chinese Policy Agenda, Multiple Streams Framework, Examination and Refinement, Special Food Safety in Online Sales

1. Introduction

(1) Background

Since the 1970s, scholars such as Roger W. Cobb, Charles D. Elder, Charles O. Jones, and John W. Kingdon have explored in depth the mechanisms by which policy agendas are formed. Among them, the Multiple Streams Framework proposed by John W. Kingdon is particularly important; it emphasizes that

the convergence of the problem stream, the policy stream, and the politics stream promotes the inclusion of a particular "problem" on the policy agenda. Although this framework has undergone extensive empirical testing and theoretical refinement abroad, its research and application in China are still insufficient. Therefore, this paper aims to make adaptive adjustments to the Multiple Streams Framework in light of China's actual conditions, in the hope of providing theoretical guidance for domestic policy agenda practice and promoting the integration of Chinese experience into the international theoretical system of policy agendas.

With the flourishing of the Internet and e-commerce, online sales have become an important channel for food consumption, and special foods (health foods, foods for special medical purposes, and infant formula foods) have gained great popularity owing to consumers' concern for health and safety. In recent years, the sales volume of special foods on online platforms has continued to grow, but this has been accompanied by some merchants illegally selling unlicensed or substandard products, which has triggered food safety problems; counterfeit and shoddy products and false advertising occur frequently, seriously threatening consumers' health. To this end, in 2016 and 2017 the Chinese government successively issued two important regulations on online food safety, marking China's pioneering step in clarifying, at the legal level, the definition of third-party platform responsibilities worldwide. In view of this, how to effectively integrate this issue into the policy-making process has become a topic urgently requiring in-depth study. This study selects the representative case of the "Guidance on Compliance for Special Food Safety in Online Sales" (hereinafter referred to as the "Compliance Guidance") to examine and refine the application of the Multiple Streams Framework in China's specific policy environment, and to further clarify the applicability of this theoretical framework in the Chinese context and the directions for its adjustment.

2. Literature Review

(1) An Overview of the Multiple Streams Framework

The Multiple Streams Framework was proposed by John W. Kingdon. From an irrationalist perspective, it constructs the problem stream, the politics stream, and the policy stream that influence the policy process, explaining how they guide policy problems into the view of decision-makers and onto the agenda. The core of this framework lies in exploring how problems attract the attention of government officials, how policy options are generated, how the government agenda is constructed, and why a particular idea surfaces at the appropriate time[1]. The theory holds that the construction of the policy agenda and the generation of alternatives involve three mutually independent yet interacting "streams": the problem stream, the policy stream, and the politics stream. Specifically, the problem stream is the process by which the public perceives and defines a problem; the politics stream refers to changes in the stance and attitude of the political system toward real social and public problems; and the policy stream is the process in which policy proposals are generated, discussed, and valued. These three streams operate independently according to their own logic, and when they converge and become coupled under specific

conditions, a "policy window" opens, generating a policy synergy that drives the introduction of policy proposals or policy change[2]. In addition, Kingdon distinguished two types of policy windows: one originating from the problem stream and the other rooted in the politics stream. At the critical moment when a decision is needed, those who raise the policy problem combine the three streams, significantly increasing the likelihood that the problem will attract the attention of policy-makers.

(2) The Application of the Multiple Streams Framework in China

Zhang Xiaoming pointed out that public policy research in China likewise exhibits the three-stream characteristics of a problem stream, a policy stream, and a politics stream, which proves the cross-contextual applicability of the Multiple Streams Framework[3]. Zeng Lingfa, in turn, emphasized the role of ambiguity and "softening" factors in agenda setting, which are crucial to the opening of the policy window, proving that the theory offers profound implications for China's policy-making[4]. A large number of scholars have studied this issue; this paper reviews the application of the Multiple Streams Framework in China from two perspectives: the policy domain and the policy ecological cycle.

In terms of policy domains, since 2005 the multiple streams theory has been gradually applied to the analysis of public policy agendas in China. On the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) platform, a search using "multiple streams" as the keyword shows that research on "policy agendas" has broadly covered such policy fields as healthcare, environmental governance, transportation, and talent and education, and has shown marked growth in recent years. Taking the field of education as an example, a number of studies have used the Multiple Streams Framework, reflecting the policy needs of different educational fields and stages of economic development in China. However, these studies focus on different streams: for example, research on the introduction of the "Double First-Class" construction policy focuses more on the interaction between the problem stream and the politics stream[5]; research on the policy of "reducing the burden on primary and secondary school teachers" emphasizes keenly perceiving the problem stream, relying on the politics stream, and optimizing the policy stream[6]; and research on the "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" policy highlights the dominant role of the politics stream[7]. Some scholars have already attempted to apply the Multiple Streams Framework to the practical exploration of specific policy agendas such as the rural logistics and transport-postal integration policy[8], national fitness[9], and shared bicycle management[10], examining the concrete process of policy introduction and practice from the perspective of multiple streams and proving that the framework has strong explanatory power.

Within the division of the policy ecological cycle, the Multiple Streams Framework appears especially important for explaining policy setting and formulation. A large body of research draws on this framework to discuss how policies enter the agenda, while some scholars, taking the opposite perspective, use the multiple streams theory to explain why certain policies are difficult to introduce; for example, Wu Junwei[11] studied why the "delayed retirement policy" could not be formally introduced for a long time. In the process of policy-setting innovation, the multiple streams theory also provides a framework for analyzing the interaction among policy problems, policy solutions, political dynamics, and policy

windows. In the discussion of policy termination, when examining the policy transition from "county administered by city" to "county administered by province," Wang Chong and Yan Qiang used the Multiple Streams Framework to focus on how changes in decision-makers' preferences and the confrontation and reconciliation of interest coalitions affect policy termination[12]. Liu Weiwei, using multiple streams analysis, dissected the structural characteristics of each stream in the abolition of the custody and repatriation system[13].

(3) Examination and Refinement of the Multiple Streams Framework

Subsequently, Chinese scholars began to conduct in-depth examination and refinement of the multiple streams theory in light of the unique context of China's policy agenda. Numerous studies point out that the multiple streams theory, as a Western tool, has limitations in explaining China's policy agenda practice and needs to be combined with China's political-administrative system to ensure the scientific accuracy of the analysis. Considering the overall leadership of the Party of China and the uniqueness of the Party-government structure, the relationships among the streams in the Chinese context appear intertwined. On this basis, Chen Jingde incorporated the three dimensions of the politics stream into the conceptual variable of "the ruling party's ideology"[14] to more aptly reflect China's reality. Wang Shaoguang pointed out that the problem stream, the politics stream, and the policy stream do not exist in complete independence but exhibit a certain sequence[15]; usually the problem stream triggers the politics stream, and the politics stream further determines whether the policy stream takes shape. Zhou Li and other scholars hold that in the context of China's policy agenda, the streams stand in a hierarchical relationship, which affects the mechanism by which the policy window opens[16]. From the perspective of policy innovators, Liu Dawei found that Chinese policy innovators, contrary to Kingdon's claim, are not independent of the streams but operate across them. They may simultaneously take on the identities of scholars and People's Congress deputies, both discovering the problem stream and participating in the policy and politics streams, thus playing an important role in promoting the merging of the streams and influencing decision-makers[17]. In addition, some scholars have incorporated the three major elements of "policy ideas," "policy image," and "policy elites" into the three dimensions of the multiple streams[18], and introduced key individuals, focusing events, and policy activists as mediating variables, carrying out a localized refinement of the Multiple Streams Framework based on the practical experience of China's policy agenda[19]; for countries with pronounced centralized features and strong party power, such integration is of great significance.

Overall, the Multiple Streams Framework can indeed effectively explain public policy, but compared with Western countries, Chinese scholars started relatively late in introducing and applying the framework, and owing to factors such as national conditions, problems exist in its practical application. In view of this, by systematically reviewing research related to the Multiple Streams Framework and taking the policy agenda practice of special food safety in online sales as an entry point, this paper closely focuses on the specific context of China's policy agenda setting and conducts empirical examination and analysis using the Multiple Streams Framework, in the hope of providing new perspectives and insights

for research in this field.

3. Analysis of the Current Situation

(1) Overview of the Market for Special Foods Sold Online

In recent years, the market size of special foods sold online has continued to expand, and the sale of health foods in particular has shown rapid growth. According to the "2024-2029 Report on Market Trends and Development Prospects of China's Health Food" released by the China Commercial Industry Research Institute, the main sales channels for health foods in China include direct selling, e-commerce, and physical pharmacies. Among them, direct selling accounts for 36% of the market share, e-commerce channels for 34%, and physical pharmacies for 16%, as shown in Figure 1. This indicates that the health food industry is showing a trend of online-offline integration.

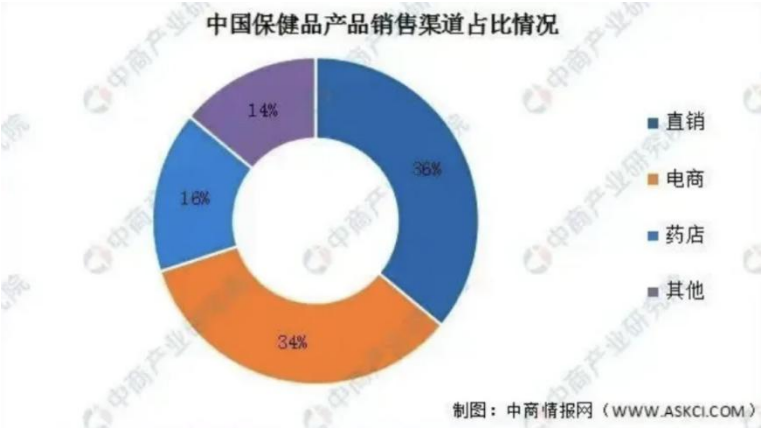


Figure 1. Share of Sales of Health Food Products in China

(2) Existing Problems

Special foods, including health foods, foods for special medical purposes, and infant formula foods, are characterized by strong functionality, specific user groups, and a relatively high frequency of use; their safety problems have a significant impact on consumer health, and they are difficult to manage and carry high risks. With the rise of e-commerce, online sales have become the main sales channel for these special foods, but the convenience of consumption has also brought many prominent safety hazards, such as false advertising, illegal addition, substandard product quality, and information asymmetry, which seriously infringe on consumers' rights and interests. According to a report by the China Consumers Association, complaints about food safety problems in 2023 were mainly concentrated on health foods and infant formula foods, involving acts such as false advertising and the use of unapproved additives. In 2018, police in Liaoyuan City, Jilin Province, cracked a case of online sales of toxic health foods, involving more than 35 million yuan. In the field of foods for special medical purposes, the 2023 CCTV "3·15" Gala also exposed livestream hosts who played the role of "children" to trick the elderly into buying so-called "miracle drugs."

(3) Policy Responses

To address these problems, the Chinese government has issued a series of related policy documents to regulate the conduct of online sales platforms and merchants and to ensure the safety of online sales of special foods. Since the 18th National Congress of the Party of China, the Party Central Committee has attached great importance to food safety. In the report to the 20th National Congress of the Party of China, Xi emphasized that "the people's health is an important symbol of a nation's prosperity and a country's strength," and called for "strengthening the supervision of food and drug safety." In 2023, at the "Two Sessions," several deputies put forward suggestions on promoting the healthy development of the health food industry and advancing the regulation of foods for special medical purposes, and the State Administration for Market Regulation subsequently published a reply on its official website. At the same time, relevant experts, scholars, and public officials paid close attention to the issue of special food safety in online sales and offered suggestions and advice. On October 13 of the same year, the "Guidance on Compliance for Special Food Safety in Online Sales" was formally issued, aiming to regulate the conduct of online sales platforms and merchants and to ensure that the sale of special foods on online platforms follows strict safety standards, thereby better safeguarding consumers' rights and interests.

4. Examination of the Multiple Streams Framework: Based on the Policy Agenda of Special Food Safety in Online Sales in China

(1) Analysis of the Problem Stream

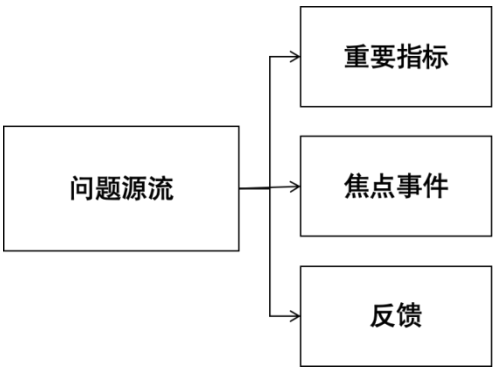


Figure 2. The Problem Stream

1. Important Indicators

Important indicators can reveal social problems and draw the attention of decision-makers. Recently, a survey report on livestreaming e-commerce of "three products and one device" jointly released by institutions including the Beijing Sunshine Consumption Big Data Research Institute showed that the market has problems such as false advertising, illegal advertisements, misleading sales, and issues with product quality and qualifications, which seriously infringe on consumers' rights and interests and disrupt market order. In addition, based on an analysis of data from national and provincial market regulation

administrations and the former food and drug administrations from 2020 to 2023, the magazine Consumer Reports found that 18 batches of substandard infant complementary foods were detected over the four years.

2. Focusing Events

The 2023 "3·15" Gala exposed livestream rooms that used "tear-jerker" dramas to trick the elderly into buying so-called "miracle drugs," arousing widespread public concern. Subsequently, media such as CCTV Finance and "First Time" successively reported on false advertising, illegal advertisements, misleading sales, and product quality problems in the e-commerce field, revealing multiple hidden dangers in the field of online special foods and intensifying public concern about food safety. A notice subsequently issued by the State Administration for Market Regulation pointed out that some special foods sold on online platforms such as Taobao and JD.com did not meet national standards, further raising the degree of social attention to this issue. Within a short period, its food safety problems rapidly occupied the public eye and became a key factor catalyzing the formulation and introduction of regulatory policies for online special foods.

3. Feedback

Because safety problems occur frequently in this field, government officials collect feedback information through multiple channels. Government departments conducted in-depth investigations into the basic situation of third-party platforms and operators selling special foods online, and comprehensively searched platforms such as Meituan, JD.com, and Taobao to identify existing problems. To strengthen supervision, enhance operators' awareness of law and responsibility, and ensure food safety, regulatory departments in many parts of the country carried out special governance campaigns. For example, in 2021 the Yuzhong District Market Regulation Administration of Chongqing conducted irregular inspections of special food sales outlets in key areas (including maternal and infant stores, pharmacies, online e-commerce businesses, and medical institutions) and of enterprises with frequent complaints and reports, strictly investigating and punishing illegal acts such as the sale of unregistered products, secondary sales via cross-border e-commerce, incomplete labels and markings, and false advertising, thereby effectively achieving the normalization of special food inspections.

(2) Analysis of the Policy Stream

Once a social problem is identified and receives widespread attention, the construction of the policy stream begins, which is mainly divided into two stages. The first stage is the proposal of suggestions, in which the policy community composed of People's Congress deputies, CPPCC members, government officials, and scholars plays a key role. Focusing on the regulation of special food safety in online sales, they put forward a number of suggestions covering issues such as enhancing regulatory enforcement, using third-party platforms for supervision, and optimizing consumer complaint mechanisms. Leveraging their dual advantages of power resources and professional knowledge, members of the policy community put forward regulatory suggestions through platforms such as the national "Two Sessions" and academic seminars. At the same time, media reporting and publicity further focused attention on the

problem, effectively pushing it onto the policy agenda.

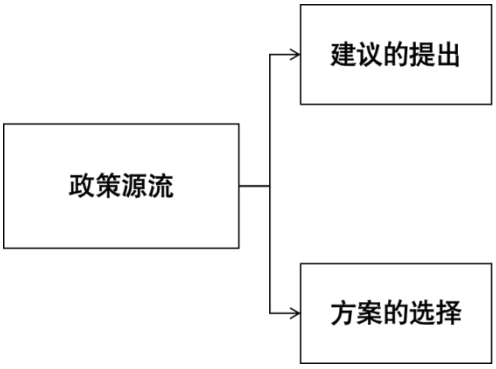


Figure 3. The Policy Stream

The second stage is the selection of options. After policy proposals are put forward, the relevant departments begin to screen specific policy options. The State Administration for Market Regulation actively responded to the suggestions of deputies to the national "Two Sessions," committing to improving the regulatory mechanism in response to new challenges to the safety of special foods sold online and to strengthening supervision in accordance with laws and regulations on the principle of "consistent online and offline supervision." Based on relevant laws and regulations such as the Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China and its implementing regulations, the E-Commerce Law of the People's Republic of China, and the Measures for the Investigation and Handling of Illegal Acts Concerning Online Food Safety, the State Administration for Market Regulation organized the formulation of the "Guidance on Compliance for Special Food Safety in Online Sales," which was officially released after extensively soliciting opinions from all parties. The Guidance aims to further regulate the conduct of online special food trading platforms and operators, raise their awareness of compliance, and ensure the implementation of the primary responsibility for food safety. This process demonstrates the dynamic evolution of the policy stream from problem identification to option selection, fully showing the key role of members of the policy community and the media's catalytic effect on policy agenda setting.

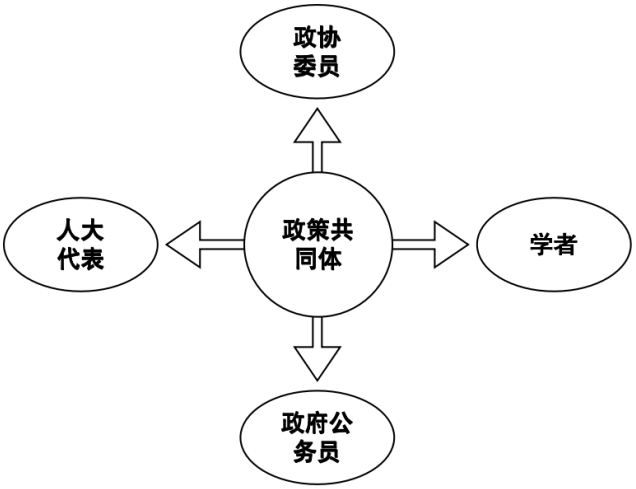


Figure 4. Relationship Map of the Policy Community

(3) Analysis of the Politics Stream

The formation of the politics stream is a complex process influenced by multiple factors. This study analyzes it from the following three core dimensions: "national mood, organized political forces, and political phenomena," as shown in Figure 5.

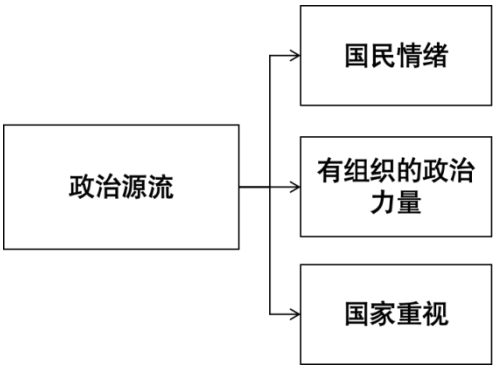


Figure 5. The Politics Stream

The national mood has a significant influence on policy agenda setting and formulation. As scholars have noted, when citizens think in a common direction, their mood swings exert an important influence on policy[20]. Taking the health food market as an example, consumer complaints about false advertising and illegal addition surged, arousing widespread public attention and discussion. Data from the China Consumers Association show that in 2019 complaints about health foods accounted for 15%-20% of total food complaints. At the same time, negative information in social media and news reports intensified public sentiment, prompting the emergence of related policy issues.

In terms of the dimension of organized political forces, the issue of special food safety in online sales has attracted the attention of the public and multiple actors. As a governing force upholding the philosophy

of "governing for the people," the government actively responds to the demands of the people and cooperates with experts to form a synergy in policy-making. At this point, policy-making is no longer a purely bureaucratic decision but gradually takes shape under the combined effect of public pressure, media exposure, and expert suggestions. Third-party platform enterprises seek cooperation under the pressure of policy regulation, reflecting the interaction and contestation among multiple interest subjects in policy formation.

In terms of the dimension of state attention, during the national "Two Sessions" in 2023, the issue of special food safety in online sales was formally raised and placed on the policy agenda. In particular, the call to "strengthen the supervision of food and drug safety" emphasized by Xi in the report to the 20th National Congress of the Party of China provided political support for the introduction of the policy on special food safety in online sales and accelerated the improvement of laws and regulations.

In summary, the formation of the politics stream is the result of the interweaving of multiple factors. This process demonstrates the dynamic interaction among public participation, media supervision, academic suggestions, and government decision-making, which jointly shape the emergence and development path of the policy on special food safety in online sales.

(4) The Policy Window

Policy entrepreneurs seized the opportunity presented by the opening of the policy window and successfully pushed the issue of special food safety in online sales onto the policy agenda. This process benefited not only from the active advocacy of People's Congress deputies but also from the attention of senior leaders. On the whole, in the problem stream, the safety hazards accompanying the surge in users of online special foods became increasingly prominent, with the exposure of the "unscrupulous workshop" incident serving as an example, which prompted a rapid response from the government. Entering the stage of the policy stream, the extensive attention of the government, scholars, the media, and the public gave rise to a series of policy proposals that gradually coalesced into solutions. At the level of the politics stream, public sentiment and the Party's governing philosophy played a key role, pushing the issue up to become an important item on the national policy agenda. In the end, the participation of policy entrepreneurs brought about the opening of the policy window, and the coupling effect of the three streams produced a consensus on the standardization of online special food services, thereby initiating the policy-making agenda.

5. Refinement of the Interactive Relationships Among the Streams and the Driving Force Behind the Opening of the Policy Window

Based on the main content of this case study—"the policy agenda of special food safety in online sales"—this paper conducts refinement and discussion of the main core elements of John Kingdon's multiple streams model and framework in four aspects: the problem stream, the policy stream, the politics stream, and the policy window, and proposes the multiple streams framework of this case. Based on this case, there are two aspects of refinement to the Multiple Streams Framework, as shown in Figure 6.

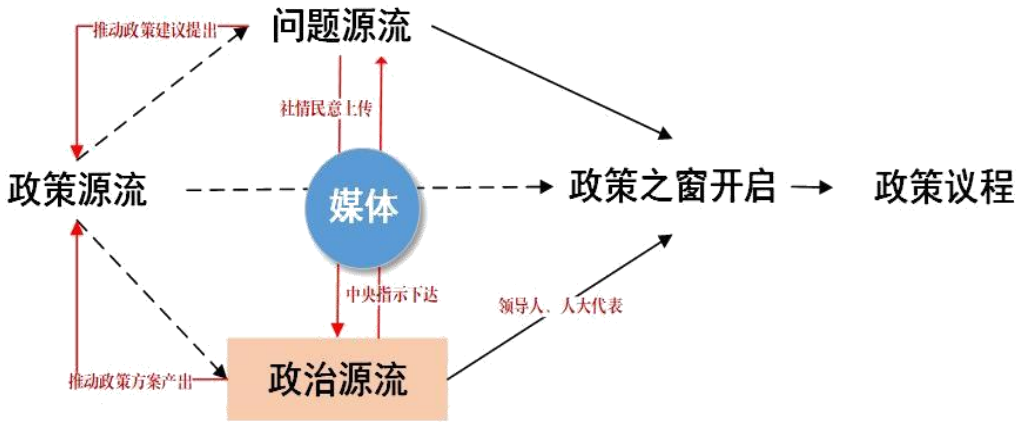


Figure 6. Refined Multiple Streams Framework

(1) Refinement of the Interactive Relationships Among the Streams

The occurrence of focusing events is a key factor driving the proposal of policy bills and the introduction of policies, and in this process the problem stream affects the politics stream and the policy stream. This interactive relationship shows that the perception of social problems and the formation of policy options influence each other.

Before the streams converge, the three streams already show a tendency toward interaction, with the politics stream playing a leading role. The emergence of focusing events prompts the government to recognize the problem and put forward proposals, reflecting the interactive influence between the problem stream and the policy stream. China's decision-making bodies, with their clearly defined powers and responsibilities, play a decisive role in shaping policy options, mirroring the close linkage between the policy stream and the politics stream. In the process of a problem rising to the policy agenda, the upward transmission of public opinion and the downward transmission of central policies vividly embody the two-way interaction between the problem stream and the politics stream, emphasizing the importance of public opinion and political orientation in policy agenda setting.

At the same time, we attach importance to the role of the media as an interactive medium; the media not only disseminate information but also shape public issues and influence the policy process, playing the role of a bridge and catalyst in the interaction of the three streams.

(2) Refinement of the Interactive Relationships Among the Streams and the Driving Forces Behind the Opening of the Policy Window

It is undeniable that in China's political system, the opening of the policy window is deeply influenced by the leadership and People's Congress deputies. Driven by both performance considerations and promotion incentives, leading officials respond highly to instructions from the Party Central Committee and higher authorities. The attention and guidance of the leadership on specific social issues effectively promote the elevation of problems to the policy agenda. This top-down policy driving force reflects the influence of the politics stream in policy agenda setting. As a key platform through which the people transmit policy proposals to the higher levels, the People's Congress—and its deputies—play an

indispensable role in promoting the opening of the policy window. By representing public opinion, they translate social concerns into the policy agenda, thereby playing a bridging role in the policy-making process.

The eruption of social problems is the trigger for the opening of the policy window. The government's attention to these problems and the rapid response of specialized agencies are where the inevitability of policy agenda setting lies. The rapid response of specialized agencies—for example, market regulation administrations in various localities launching special campaigns—to social conditions and public opinion is key to the opening of the policy window. The ability of these agencies to quickly identify and respond to social problems laid the foundation for policy agenda setting. Under the supervision of the leadership and the impetus of People's Congress deputies, the related problems were quickly brought into agenda discussions. This interaction between top-down and bottom-up forces jointly drove the opening of the policy window.

6. Policy Recommendations for Special Food Safety in Online Sales

(1) Strengthening the Construction of the Regulatory System and Refining Implementation Standards

Although the "Guidance on Compliance for Special Food Safety in Online Sales" has initially regulated the online sale of special foods, its implementation standards still need to be refined: the types of special foods involved are numerous, the standards are inconsistent, and supervision is relatively loose. It is recommended to further refine relevant laws, regulations, and standards, and to clarify the scope of supervision, product labeling, testing methods, and traceability system requirements. In particular, for emerging special foods such as functional foods and health products, a more detailed regulatory system should be developed to avoid market loopholes and ensure that market participants operate within a compliant framework.

(2) Strengthening Platform Responsibility and Clarifying the Primary Responsibility of Platforms

As the core of e-commerce transactions, online sales platforms need clearly strengthened regulatory responsibility. Platforms should strictly review the qualifications of merchants, especially the sales licenses for special foods. At the same time, platforms should regularly organize spot checks on the special foods sold and promptly remove problematic products from their shelves. Complaint and reporting mechanisms should also be established and improved, which can effectively prevent substandard or non-compliant special foods from entering the market and reduce safety hazards for consumers.

(3) Strengthening Cross-Departmental Collaboration and Information Sharing

Food safety supervision requires coordination among multiple departments; supervision by a single department often has blind spots. It is recommended that the State Administration for Market Regulation, public security organs, and other departments strengthen cooperation and establish an information-sharing platform. When a safety hazard is found in a particular special food or merchant, all departments can respond quickly to achieve all-round supervision and eliminate blind spots in regulation.

(4) Enhancing Consumer Education and Publicity

The government and platforms should jointly hold relevant publicity activities to strengthen food safety education for consumers, especially by guiding consumers toward a correct understanding and use of special foods, thereby enhancing their food safety awareness. This will help consumers identify and avoid merchants that engage in false advertising and exaggerated claims. By raising consumers' level of awareness and promoting rational consumption, the market space for non-compliant goods can be reduced from the demand side.

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