Chinese farmers’ attitude towards the improvement of animal welfare in their facilities

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate Chinese farmers’ attitude towards animal welfare by using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). According to the TPB, an individual’s intention to behave in a certain way is determined by his/her attitude towards the behaviour (specific attitude — importance — and general attitudes), the perceived behavioural control (easiness), and the supposed opinion of the people who are important to him/her (subjective norms). A total of 253 questionnaires were used, which included the three main animal productions in China (swine, poultry and cattle). Chinese farmers have perceived the improvement of animal welfare as two abstracts: general attitudes (reward-seeking, and empathic farmer); and four specific categories of actions (favourable environment, animal health, humane treatment of animals and farmers’ well-being). Our analysis revealed that general and specific attitudes were the strongest predictors of farmers’ intentions to improve animal welfare in the questionnaire study. In fact, Chinese farmers considered it fairly important to improve the animal welfare measures considered in the survey. In contrast, the same animal welfare measures were considered difficult to improve by the farmers as indicated by the lack of association between the easiness of improving animal welfare and the intentions. In addition, veterinarians, agricultural advisers, and scientific experts were considered to be relatively influential subjective norms as regards the activities of the farmers. This is the first study to provide an insight into the underlying meanings and values of Chinese farmers’ views on improvements to animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, cattle, Chinese farmers, poultry, Theory of Planned Behaviour

Introduction

During the last sixty years, the population and urbanisation of Asian countries have risen exponentially, fuelling further demand for meat and dairy products and causing major changes to farm animal systems defined as the ‘Livestock Revolution’ (Brown 2003; Delgado 2003). This phenomenon has been more evident in East and South-East Asia, where the demand for bovine meat, mutton, and goat has swelled and poultry and pig meat production has risen more than ten-fold (FAO 2005). Currently, Asia accounts for 39% of global meat production, going from 10.2 to 13.5 billion during the last ten years (FAO 2016; Sinclair et al 2017). This increased demand for meat and dairy products has led to a scaling up of livestock and poultry sectors from traditional household production designed mainly for self-consumption or local market distribution, to intensive production on an industrial scale (Wang et al 2016). This trend towards intensive, large-scale cultivation in livestock and poultry sectors, has aroused considerable concern for both the environment and food safety (Jiang et al 2016). China, as is the case in many developing countries, is affected by the level of national economic development, and standards of animal welfare have tended to rank lower on the list of priorities of farmers, who are more concerned about availability and quality of feeds, production yield, and disease control (Nielsen & Zhao 2012). In addition, there remains a fundamental lack of understanding as to the importance of animal welfare among the majority of livestock stakeholders in China, leading to an absence of relevant policies to address this matter (Li et al 2017). For example, a survey on the attitudes to animal welfare during slaughter and transport in Asia (Sinclair et al 2017) revealed that Chinese respondents reported the lowest importance levels for animal welfare; they were least likely to report