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## CHINA'S ANIMALS GET NEW RESPECT

*by Jeremy Hurewitz*

**T**HE LIYUAN DOG market is located on a windswept lot in the Tongzhou district of Beijing. Most vendors are selling what appear to be pure-bred dogs, clearly as pets, not meals. Requests for dog meat are met with embarrassed smiles and protests that they don't do that anymore. But finally someone quietly points towards an area at the back of the lot, where another row of stalls stands.

There Liu Huazhu beams with pride as he describes his dog business. When asked about dog meat, he points to a cage housing two mangy-looking large dogs. His business card offers a full range of "dogs and dog meat."

Mr. Liu used to be able to butcher the dogs here and sell the meat directly to people who would take it to some of the restaurants that lined the market and specialized in cooking dog. He complains that negative press reports caused officials to crack down, closing the restaurants and restricting him from killing dogs in the market. A smaller (tastier) dog goes for 20 yuan per kilo, or around 400 yuan for a whole dog. One of the larger dogs in the cage, which weighs around 40 kilos, would cost 500 yuan.

These days Mr. Liu is often the only one at the market offering dog meat, though in the winter business is better because the Chinese believe that eating dog meat keeps you warm. He has been in the dog business since 1995.

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∞ *Mr. Hurewitz is a Shanghai-based writer.*

The timing is significant, because that was the year Beijing City enacted a law requiring dog owners to register their pets and pay a fee of 5,000 yuan (\$604), a charge that many couldn't afford. Suddenly the supply of cheap dogs surged as owners abandoned their pets en masse.

The law changed the life of Zhang Yuping in an entirely different way. Disturbed by the animal emergency she saw around her, she quit her career in real estate and devoted herself full-time to animal welfare. Today she runs a shelter in the outlying Changping district.

The facility is built like a fortress, with high gray walls surrounding its 21,000 square meters. Most of the funding comes from abroad, from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the International Fund for Animal Welfare. As well as a veterinary clinic, classroom and quarantine area, the shelter houses 12 dog and cat kennels with more than 400 animals, which seem in generally good shape.

Ms. Zhang describes her effort to lobby the government to change the registration law, which was eventually successful and led the government to reduce the fee to 1,000 yuan from 5,000 yuan, and half that if the dog is neutered or spayed. As she speaks she strokes a tiny kitten that has climbed up on the table. Ms. Zhang sips from a metal thermos of tea-leaves and communicates warmth from her eyes, a light blue eyeliner the only nod to feminine vanity in a woman consumed with more important things.

Ms. Zhang has been using the good government contacts she built up as a businesswoman and activist over the past

several decades to push for a nationwide animal-rights law. "My hope is that the Chinese government will look overseas for a model, and that with the government focused on its international image a law will be passed before the 2008 Olympic Games," she says.

China is not known for its enlightened views toward animals. In a country where human rights is still a term that can get you into trouble, the concept of animal rights seems strange to most people. Aside from wildlife regulations protecting some endangered species, there is currently no law that protects animals. But there is a rising movement—both Chinese and foreign—pushing the government to pass such legislation. In November, when the Beijing authorities started a new crackdown on unregistered dogs, owners staged public demonstrations, a rare event in the tightly controlled capital.

The humane societies that have been popping up in Chinese cities during the last decade or so are largely small groups trying to find homes for abandoned cats and dogs. These groups generally have Web sites and try to educate Chinese about sterilization and how to care for their pets. They often publicize acts of cruelty and shame the perpetrators.

Beijing's Pet sos was founded by Tian Yuan and her husband out of a fondness for animals (even though Ms. Tian is allergic to most of them). She says they are circulating a petition pushing for an animal-rights law and hope to deliver it to a representative from the National People's Congress in the near future.

The animal-rights movement is driven by China's extraordinary economic growth. Upwardly mobile Chinese increasingly are adopting pets into their lives. The one-child policy has encouraged parents to fill out what were traditionally large families with animals.

But Dr. James Holder, a veterinarian

from the U.K. who has been practicing in China for the last four years, sees a population little prepared to care for their pets. He feels that while the rising demand for pets has undoubtedly been good for the overall cause of animal welfare, "there are over 100 million pets in China, too many in a country that doesn't know how to care for pets."

Seeing them as a surrogate for the children, "they treat dogs like babies, allowing them to eat from their table, and they never discipline them," which leads to unruly behavior. Pets are fattened up, just like children. But overweight animals tend to have health problems, and health problems lead to medical costs. Unruly and sick dogs are often abandoned.

To understand the unique nature of China's relationship with animals one must visit Guangdong province. The southern region bordering Hong Kong and Macau is the source both of China's strangest culinary tastes and the incubator of frightening new diseases. The locals brag that they eat "anything with four legs except a table, and anything that flies except a plane," in part because they believe that eating wild animals promotes vitality. A favorite dish in these parts is "Dragon-Tiger-Phoenix Soup," made with snake, cat and chicken.

But such tastes have led to public health crises. SARS is said to have originated in this area from civet cats that were sold in the wildlife markets. It is difficult to pin down exactly where bird flu developed, but many feel that this area is uniquely capable of producing zoonotic diseases that jump from beast to man. Virologists believe that avian flu viruses started crossing the species barrier after the domestication of fowl in southern China around 3,000 years ago, and point to flu epidemics in 1957 and 1968 that originated in this area.

But it is clear that the post-SARS environment of southern China, coupled with the ongoing concerns over the H5N1 flu,



Security forces kill an unregistered dog in a village outside of Beijing as part of a vigorous campaign to enforce stringent dog-ownership laws China recently implemented in response to its rabies problem.

has changed the open nature of the infamous wildlife markets. The SARS outbreak originated out of Guangzhou's Chou Tou market or a market just like it that sold palm civets, which are believed to be the original reservoir of the coronavirus. Chou Tou is still open, but the government has restricted the sale of wild animals. The cramped, corroded cages that housed a huge variety of fauna are conspicuously empty. The vendors say that they can no longer keep the animals in the market, but they can get whatever a customer wants.

Professor Mang Ping of the Central Socialist Academy in Beijing is perhaps China's best-known animal-rights activist. Her advocacy began in the 1980s when she was disturbed by changes she was witnessing. As the economy boomed, the country moved ever further out of harmony with the natural world. She noted a growing environmental wasteland and disturbing culinary trends spreading from Guangdong province. Many of the Special Economic Zones were established in this southern province and their success led local habits to become fashionable in other areas of China, one of which was the eating of exotic wildlife.

Professor Mang began writing articles urging Chinese to show greater respect toward animals. She criticized conditions in Chinese zoos and the tendency of people to throw rocks at the animals. She got a

positive but flabbergasted response—one woman called her up and said, "I could never have imagined someone writing an article defending the rights of animals before reading yours."

But what really distinguishes Professor Mang is her deep understanding of Chinese history and her finger on the pulse of trends within society. She has focused on "trying to remind the Chinese of their traditions of mercy" by writing books about the beliefs of Confucius, who successfully lobbied to have the hunting season reduced to give animals the chance to regenerate, and about the traditions of Taoism and Buddhism, both of which preach respect for nature and all living creatures and have strong associations with vegetarianism.

Professor Mang sees a social sickness within China that manifests itself in cruelty to animals. She looks around China and sees a country retarded by the war, famine and crazy social experiments of the 20th century, all of which have now been exacerbated by breakneck economic growth leading to rampant corruption and selfishness.

What stands out the most for Professor Mang among these periods—perhaps because she lived through it—is the Cultural Revolution. On top of all the hardships already suffered by the Chinese, "the Cultural Revolution finally made people lose their mercy." She shakes her head and talks about "cats thrown out of windows" because "pets were considered part of the capitalist lifestyle." When Professor Mang hears people tell her that human problems are more important than anything related to animals, she replies that attitudes toward animals are a bellwether of society's health.

But Professor Mang—a petite woman, casually dressed in a white zipper sweater, with short black hair—is practical and says the government is most ready to act when it comes to combating disease, so it

## *Professor Mang Ping sees a social sickness within China that manifests itself in cruelty to animals.*

is more receptive to ideas about raising hygiene standards for animals on farms than dealing with a more general law banning outright cruelty to animals. But the government worries about enforcing any sort of animal welfare law. Raising hygiene standards or creating rules for farming practices to reduce the suffering of animals might encounter resistance in the provinces, where it will probably bring higher costs, and the government is already nervous about rural unrest. It would embarrass the government if it enacted a law that was ignored.

There is a tradition within Chinese culture of dealing with social deviance outside the context of the law. For instance, in March this year a video circulated on the Internet of a Chinese woman in a black miniskirt and stiletto heels caressing a kitten on a road near Hangzhou. She then placed the kitten down and stepped on it, brutally killing the little creature with a casual smile on her face. The sequence was among a number of similar videos on a fetishist Web site that specialized in showing pretty women crushing small animals.

The media picked it up and China's busy chat rooms exploded with indignation. Eventually the netizens tracked down the kitten crusher, Wang Jue, a nurse at a hospital in Luobei County, Heilongjiang province. When her bosses found out what happened they suspended her. Li Yuejun, who sold the video for 15 yuan per CD, was a cameraman at a local TV station and he was also suspended.

Professor Mang says she is encouraged by the fact these actions caused opprobrium and negative consequences for the perpetrators. "Attitudes towards animals are

changing step by step." But for real change in China "we need an animal protection law modeled on those from abroad."

One organization that is actively changing attitudes is Animals Asia. Founded by Jill Robinson in 1998, the group is best known for its efforts to save Moon Bears from the practice of farming them for their bile, which is an ingredient of traditional Chinese medicine. In July 2000, Animals Asia signed the first agreement between the Chinese government and any outside animal welfare organization, pledging to rescue 500 bears from the worst farms in Sichuan province and work towards the final elimination of bear farming.

Their other priority is a "Dr. Dog" program, operating in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and recently in Chengdu, with the slogan "Friend Not Food." The organization takes dogs specially selected for their tolerant and friendly personalities to visit hospitals and schools, cheering up the sick and educating children in an effort to show that dogs are better suited as companions than as food.

Executive Director Annie Mather says that the organization's "overall objective is to improve animal welfare in China." They see the China Bear Rescue and Dr. Dog programs "as two poles of animal welfare" which introduce "the concept that animals have complex feelings." These two poles easily appeal to intrinsic human emotions and help to gently pose greater questions about how society views animals overall. Only then will the abuse of animals become unacceptable. "It will end from within," says Ms. Mather, "not because of the international community stamping their feet." ■