
China's pet activists: Using moral arguments and epidemic concerns to make space for animal rights

SUZANNE BARBER

Anthropology Department, Purdue University, United States of America

MICHAEL HATHAWAY

Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

In China, a widespread movement for animal rights arose only recently and without a strong level of state-based support, unlike the well-documented rise in Europe and North America. This movement has nonetheless become a vocal force for social change. Somewhat surprisingly, as other social movements have experienced increasing state-led resistance and pressure since 2012, the animal rights contingent has remained a vibrant part of the social landscape that mediates humans' relations with other animals. How have these agents been able to persist despite the greater political clampdown? We argue that the Covid-19 pandemic, first identified in China, has become a new resource for animal rights activists. These activists are working to leverage the growing fear of zoonotic contagion as a rationale for their work for dogs.

Keywords: China; animal rights; animal studies

Preamble: China's recent shift in civil society

After Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, many scholars have reported a shrinking of civil society.¹ This has been especially true for social movements with strong international connections that challenge the status quo, such as activists in feminist,² environmentalist,³ queer rights⁴ and labour

1 Samson Yuen, 'Friend or Foe? The Diminishing Space of China's Civil Society', *China Perspectives* 2015 (March 2015): 51–6, doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6807.

2 Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018).

3 Setsuko Matsuzawa, *Activating China: Local Actors, Foreign Influence, and State Response* (London: Routledge, 2019), doi.org/10.4324/9781351118460.

4 Gareth Shaw and Zhang Xiaoling, 'Cyberspace and Gay Rights in a Digital China: Queer Documentary Filmmaking under State Censorship', *China Information* 32, no. 2 (2018): 270–92, doi.org/10.1177/0920203X17734134.

rights⁵ movements. How has the animal rights movement, also tied to international support, been able to keep active in this challenging environment? We argue that, in part, activists have been able to use the language of the national state to try to affect local state officials.⁶ More recently, they have drawn on long-standing fears of disease contagion, which have only been exacerbated after the SARS and Covid-19 pandemics, as a tool to fight for their own aims. In this way, the pandemic may become a resource for the expansion of certain forms of animal rights in China.

The Chinese animal rights movement is little known outside of China.⁷ A number of scholars have discussed how often Westerners consider a Chinese animal rights movement as ‘surprising’ or ‘unexpected’.⁸ Some point out that, in 2007, there were no animal welfare laws in China.⁹ Others note the long history of Western condemnation of certain culinary practices, such as eating snakes or dogs, a form of racialisation.¹⁰ From this racialised legacy, some wonder about how this ties in newer forms of criticism based more on fears of endangerment and waste, such as eating soup made with swallows’ nests or sharks’ fins.¹¹ As the anthropologist Mary Douglas pointed out long ago, many cultures have notions of purity, and food laws that prohibit eating certain animals, whether they are pigs, cows, horses or dogs.¹² When the British took over Hong Kong in 1842, they were disturbed that dogs, which they often described as ‘man’s best friend’, were being eaten, but they only outlawed it in 1950, after a rabies epidemic.¹³ Animal rights extend beyond culinary practices into multiple fronts to reshape relations with other animals. Animal rights has often been labelled as ‘Western’, and one Chinese scholar who advocates animal rights was described as ‘defaming their own motherland and catering to the interests of the West in its desire to dominate non-Western civilizations’.¹⁴

5 Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, ‘State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?’, *China Journal* 80, no. 1 (2018): 111–29, doi.org/10.1086/696986.

6 See also Oona A. Hathaway, ‘International Delegation and State Sovereignty’, *Law and Contemporary Problems* 71, no. 1 (2008): 115–49.

7 Suzanne Barber, ‘Nonhuman Animal Welfare in China: Evolving Rhetorical Strategies for Changing Law and Policy’, *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy* 18, no. 4 (2015): 309–21, doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2015.1096160; Guo Longpeng, ‘An Emerging Social Movement in China: Frames and Activists in Dog-Rescue Actions’ (MPhil diss., Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2016).

8 Peter J. Li, ‘The Evolving Animal Rights and Welfare Debate in China: Political and Social Impact Analysis’, in *Animals, Ethics and Trade: The Challenge of Animal Sentience*, ed. Jacky Turner and Joyce D’Silva (London: Earthscan, 2006), 111–28.

9 David Szybel, ‘Animal Rights Law: Fundamentalism versus Pragmatism’, *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007): 1–35.

10 Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

11 Mei Zhan, ‘Civet Cats, Fried Grasshoppers, and David Beckham’s Pajamas: Unruly Bodies after SARS’, *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 1 (2005): 31–42, doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.1.031.

12 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

13 Shuk-Wah Poon, ‘Dogs and British Colonialism: The Contested Ban on Eating Dogs in Colonial Hong Kong’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 2 (2014): 308–28, doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2013.851873.

14 Li, ‘The Evolving Animal Rights and Welfare Debate in China’, 113.

To compound these expectations, many anglophone accounts of *the* animal rights movement display forms of provincialism by only looking at North America,¹⁵ without acknowledging the diversity of movements around the world. Throughout Asia, there are diverse and vigorous animal rights movements, especially in places such as India.¹⁶

Some scholars¹⁷ describe the animal welfare movement as having one of three concerns: (1) wildlife, (2) domestic animals or (3) farm and laboratory animals. In this paper, we focus on domestic animals and the potentially slippery ground between dogs as companion animals and dogs as livestock. This paper is mainly based on anthropological fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta by the first author from 2013 to 2016. We have also supplemented this first-hand research with media coverage and academic reports after that time. We focus on animal rights efforts to protect dogs from killing, mainly as a source of food for restaurants, but also as objects of periodic 'culls' ordered by government officials when dogs are seen as a threatening source of disease. As it has developed in China, the bulk of these kind of animal rights activists work at the grassroots, often coordinating direct action to stop trucks from carrying cats and dogs to restaurants. Since 2011, the American radical animal rights activist Steve Best has described members of the Chinese animal rights movement as among the world's vanguard activists.¹⁸

We choose to focus on dogs for four main reasons: they have become one of the most politicised non-human animals, especially as the main species that move back and forth between the category of 'pet', 'pest' and food; they are the most consistent animal object of state-led killings; they constitute the main basis for the booming pet industry;¹⁹ and are the focus of much animal rights activism.

We have two explanations to make about our word choice in this paper. First, we take a post-humanist position, referring to dogs and cats as 'other animals' rather than using the more common term 'animals', which perpetuates a false dichotomy between humans and animals. Along these lines, we use the pronouns 'who' to

15 Harold D. Guither, *Animal Rights: History and Scope of a Radical Social Movement* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998); Emily Gaarder, *Women and the Animal Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), doi.org/10.36019/9780813550817.

16 Krithika Srinivasan, 'The Biopolitics of Animal Being and Welfare: Dog Control and Care in the UK and India', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2013): 106–19, doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00501.x; Naisargi N. Dave, 'Witness: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming', *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2014): 433–56, doi.org/10.14506/ca29.3.01; Radhika Govindrajana, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226560045.001.0001.

17 Jiaqi Lu, Kathryn Bayne and Jianfei Wang, 'Current Status of Animal Welfare and Animal Rights in China', *Alternatives to Laboratory Animals* 41, no. 5 (2013): 351–57, doi.org/10.1177/026119291304100505.

18 Steven Best, 'Chinese Direct Activists Strike Again!', 11 June 2012, drstevebest.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/chinese-direct-activists-strike-again, accessed 24 November 2021.

19 Wang Chen, 'The dark side of China's pet boom', *China Dialogue*, 13 November 2019, chinadialogue.net/en/business/11654-the-dark-side-of-china-s-pet-boom-2, accessed 22 October 2021.

describe other animals, as compared to ‘that’ or ‘it’, which renders other animals as objects and promotes a form of human exceptionalism. Second, we employ the terms used by animal rights activists, who borrow from the kind of everyday language used by the Chinese state, especially during the Mao era but which continues into the present, in describing those involved in the dog meat industry and their practices in negative terms. These include terms such as ‘black market smugglers’ or ‘dens’. In the first instance, calling it the ‘black’ market recognises that it exists outside of the legal realm, and is a term used by the state that vilifies such markets and justifies state action to disrupt them. In the second instance, the term ‘den’ (*wo*) is an ironic one for activists to use, in that it makes reference to denning animals such as bears or rats, and is an animalising term that portrays such a place as one of malevolence.²⁰

The current pandemic and a brief history of zoonotic diseases in China

The Covid-19 pandemic is merely the latest in a series of global epidemics that have emerged from China. Many of these diseases are zoonotic, that is they involve transmission at some point from other animal species, such as malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Most famously, China was the origin site of two major waves of bubonic plague. In the 1300s, the ‘Black Death’ plague killed as many as 25 million people in Europe and another 25 million people in Asia and Africa. In the late 1800s, another wave of plague headed around the world from China, where it remained prominent in India for nearly a century, killing more than half of the worldwide total death toll of 15 million people.²¹

On the domestic front, China has actively fought a range of zoonotic diseases. In 1949, after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established under the leadership of Mao Zedong, there was a substantial shift to a more nationwide approach to control epidemics. Organised teams began operations to eliminate malarial conditions, reduce diseases like rabies, and carry out large-scale public health campaigns, such as the famous ‘barefoot doctors’ movement. In fact, a major component of PRC legitimacy was their claim to bring large-scale improvements in sanitation and health for the majority of Chinese citizens.²² By 1952, China carried out a Patriotic Hygiene Campaign that used the language of germs and disease to encourage citizens to clean up urban areas. As described by Ruth Rogaski:

20 China has a long history of using animalising terms to vilify those seen as enemies of leadership, such as the term *niugui sheshen* (‘ox ghosts and snake demons’), which was popular in the Cultural Revolution.

21 John Frith, ‘The History of Plague—Part 1. The Three Great Pandemics’, *Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health* 20, no. 2 (2012), jmvh.org/article/the-history-of-plague-part-1-the-three-great-pandemics, accessed 22 October 2021.

22 Ruth Rogaski, ‘Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity: China’s Korean War Germ-Warfare Experience Reconsidered’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002): 381–415, doi.org/10.2307/2700295.

The link between the psychology of the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign and later mass mobilizations is expressed most vividly in Mao Zedong's well-known poem from the Great Leap Forward, 'Song wenshen' (Farewell to the god of plagues). Mao wrote the poem in praise of Yujiang county, which had just reported the successful annihilation (*xiaomie*) of the snail that transmitted schistosomiasis.²³

This case of 'successful annihilation' of an animal that had caused major problems for human health for centuries seemed indicative of the major possibilities to reformulate the relations between humans and nature in China. Some referred to this period as a time of 'Mao's war against nature'.²⁴ Later, other animals identified as possible threats to human food supplies and health were targeted as pests, to be eliminated. A number of species were targeted, with limited success, like flies and rats, and others were almost completely wiped out, like wild tigers. These extreme plans that promoted episodic campaigns of great intensity were part of the Maoist legacy that later inflected reactions to the twenty-first century zoonotic outbreaks.

In the twenty-first century, the 2002 SARS epidemic was China's first alarming zoonotic outbreak. First identified in Guangdong Province, it eventually spread to several dozen countries. China was hit especially hard, with over half of the world's approximately 8,400 cases, and Hong Kong had almost another quarter. In these two places, about 600 people died. As is well known, SARS led to a kind of global vilification of 'wet markets' and 'exotic wildlife' as a source of the original contagion, and China shut down its wildlife markets, at least briefly.²⁵ Photographers highlighted images of wildlife in cages piled on top of each other. Such scenarios are often described as breeding grounds for disease, where scientists describe such close interspecies relations of cramped quarters as creating a higher risk for potential mutation.

These diseases have highlighted the prevalence and power of zoonotic disease, a phenomenon that challenges the often assumed barrier between humans and non-humans, showing how diseases can flow from one species to another. It is often estimated that of the 1,600 known human pathogens, over 60 per cent are zoonotic, and of the emerging diseases, over 75 per cent are zoonotic.²⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic, which has now affected every country on earth, has forced an increasing understanding that the virus makes use of animal bodies that allow it to spread. Whereas an earlier focus on human disease looked more at a person's

23 Ibid., 394.

24 J. Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511512063.

25 Mei Zhan, 'Civet Cats, Fried Grasshoppers, and David Beckham's Pajamas: Unruly Bodies after SARS', *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 1 (2006): 36, doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.1.031.

26 Fiona M. Tomley and Martin W. Shirley, 'Livestock infectious diseases and zoonoses', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1530 (27 September 2009), 2637–42, doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0133.

individual susceptibility to disease, Covid-19 has focused global attention much more on individuals as ‘reservoirs’ and ‘vectors’, with a greater emphasis on techniques of quarantine and isolation. The origins of Covid-19 remain speculative, but very closely related diseases are found in horseshoe bats in Yunnan Province, which might have spread the disease to pangolins at wildlife markets like the one in Wuhan where it was first detected.²⁷ After emerging in humans, it was often thought by scientists to basically stay in human bodies (with occasional infections given to domestic animals like dogs and cats, who were generally regarded as not posing risks in reinfecting other humans, what is called ‘zoonosis in reverse’).²⁸ Yet, recently, there have been cases of ‘spillover’ from human-transmitted Covid-19, such as where officials determined that mink on a Dutch farm had caught the disease and transmitted it to humans.²⁹ In this case, millions of mink were killed as a precaution.



Figure 1: Cats rescued from an intercepted smuggling truck await treatment by volunteers, 2016.

Source: Suzanne Barber.

27 Nicholas J. Dimonaco, Mazdak Salavati and Barbara B. Shih, ‘Computational Analysis of SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-Like Coronavirus Diversity in Human, Bat and Pangolin Populations’, *Viruses* 13, no. 1 (2021): 49, doi.org/10.3390/v13010049.

28 Han Sang Yoo and Dongwan Yoo, ‘COVID-19 and Veterinarians for One Health, Zoonotic and Reverse-Zoonotic Transmissions’, *Journal of Veterinary Science* 21, no. 3 (2020), doi.org/10.4142/jvs.2020.21.e51.

29 Martin Enserink, ‘Coronavirus Rips through Dutch Mink Farms, Triggering Culls’, *Science* 368, no. 6496 (2020): 1169, doi.org/10.1126/science.368.6496.1169.

Thus, while the threat of zoonotic contagion is a growing concern, Chinese animal rights activists are hoping to use such concerns in ways that do not lead to mass killing, or 'culls'. In the case of SARS, civet cats were newly regarded as a potential threat, the government threatened to kill 10,000 of them in an effort to protect human health.³⁰ Thus, based on a long history of dog culls, animal rights activists have to be careful about how they frame the fears of contagion, to avoid framing the potential problems in ways that justify the deaths of dogs. With the Covid-19 pandemic, there were many rumours about how in China pets were being killed due to fear of them as a source of contagion. While it does seem true that many pets were abandoned in some areas, it is hard to know the actual correlations.³¹ These activists are attempting to carefully use quickly expanding laws and an overall public fear of contagion as a way to challenge the safety of the dog-meat industry. Many hope to eventually decommodify dogs as a culinary possibility or, in the common terms used in China, move them from the potential category of 'food' into the all-encompassing category of 'friend' or 'pet'.

The dog as pest in the PRC

For various reasons, in the history of the PRC starting in 1949, dogs have been regarded as a potential pest. Within the PRC's first year, the new state proclaimed that it would eliminate all free-roaming dogs in Beijing. It implemented a rigorous registration system with tags showing that dogs had received a rabies vaccination, and an annual renewal of a licence.³² In 1957, the Canadian journalist William Kinmond was allowed into China, and he was very curious why there seemed to be no dogs in China. He reported:

The Chinese people were told, and the Chinese people believe, that their dogs had to be killed to avoid the spread of germs of bacteriological warfare waged by the 'American aggressors' in Korea.³³

Kinmond was sceptical of such claims and later came to his own conclusion that the real reason was that dogs have to be fed. Although many others have claimed that pets were banned, there is little evidence to support this assertion.³⁴

30 Mei Zhan, 'Civet Cats, Fried Grasshoppers, and David Beckham's Pajamas: Unruly Bodies after SARS', *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 1 (2006): 36, doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.1.031.

31 Nicola M. A. Parry, 2020. 'COVID-19 and pets: When pandemic meets panic', *Forensic Science International Reports*, 2 December 2020, 100090, doi.org/10.1016/j.fsir.2020.100090.

32 Elaine Jeffreys, 'Beijing Dog Politics: Governing Human-Canine Relationships in China', *Anthrozoös* 33, no. 4 (2020): 516, doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2020.1771057.

33 William Kinmond, *No Dogs in China: A Report on China Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 164, doi.org/10.3138/9781487589264.

34 Jeffreys, 'Beijing Dog Politics'.

Regardless of the actual reasons for the low numbers of urban dogs that Kinmond saw in the 1950s, fear of rabies, a viral disease that mainly uses dogs as a vector, has been seen as one of the main threats from dogs. Such fears legitimised periodic ‘dog culls’ in China, where state workers would sweep through an area, often beating dogs to death in public. At least in some places, like Beijing, there were strict laws about dog ownership, and in 1980 a new set of laws was introduced that prohibited dogs as pets in all cities above the county level in order to ‘eradicate rabies, ensure public safety, maintain the urban environment, and guarantee the normal conduct of work, study, and everyday life’.³⁵ Nonetheless, this did not mean that there were no dogs, and in Beijing in 1986, census takers reported around 280,000, falling to 110,000 in 1991.³⁶ Thus, there were still likely millions of urban dogs in China’s large cities, and in a number of rural areas, dogs could quickly multiply without spaying and neutering campaigns. Although no scholars have attempted to create a comprehensive database to account for all of the bans on dogs and subsequent culls, they continue into the present and can be carried out on a massive scale. In 2006 and 2009, for instance, nearly 50,000 dogs were killed in each of two different locations. These events, which served to normalise the public killing of dogs in highly visible campaigns, have since begun to generate large-scale concern and opposition. In part those challenging the culls have questioned their effectiveness in fighting rabies.

Yet even after decades of large-scale efforts, China has the world’s second-highest rate of rabies infections, after India. In the PRC, between 85 and 95 per cent of human rabies cases are attributed to dog bites.³⁷ Once the disease has reached an advanced stage, it is nearly 100 per cent fatal. The rates of rabies have gone up and down since 1950 when statistics began to be tallied. High periods average between 2,000 and 3,000 cases per year. In 1996, a number of epidemiologists cheered when the number of cases dipped below 200, but starting in 2007, it reached another peak with over 3,300 cases of human rabies.³⁸

Recently, a growing number of organisations and individuals, from epidemiologists to the World Health Organization (WHO), are challenging China’s main approach to fighting rabies. Organisations such as the WHO are now entering into the debate, declaring that there is a lack of evidence that culls can control dog populations or rabies.³⁹ They point out that China’s everyday approach to managing dogs has been less intensive than a number of other countries, with lower rates of spaying or neutering dogs, less support for permanent animal control workers to round up stray dogs, and a low rate of immunisation of dogs against rabies and other diseases.⁴⁰

35 Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Foreign Trade (1980), in Jeffreys, ‘Beijing Dog Politics’, 518.

36 BLR (2003), 260, in Jeffreys, ‘Beijing Dog Politics’, 518.

37 Xianchun Tang et al., ‘Pivotal Role of Dogs in Rabies Transmission, China’, *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 11, no. 12 (2005): 1970, doi.org/10.3201/eid1112.050271.

38 Juan Zhang et al., ‘Analysis of Rabies in China: Transmission Dynamics and Control’, *PLoS One* 6, no. 7 (2011): e20891, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0020891.

39 World Health Organization, *WHO Expert Consultation on Rabies: First Report* (Geneva: WHO, 2004).

40 Zhang et al., ‘Analysis of Rabies in China’.

The WHO has even commented on the situation in China, recommending that it ban the import of rural dogs into urban areas, on the grounds of their potentially spreading disease, due to the mixing together of many poorly treated dogs in close quarters and the especially low vaccination rates among rural dogs. This situation, in fact, is one of the main situations that animal rights activists are fighting against, where dog smugglers gather up many rural dogs and deliver them by truck to urban restaurants.

This history, where the state has identified the dog as occupying a status like a pest, a threat to human health, presents a fundamental challenge to animal rights activists. Although some dog owners have been deeply saddened by the culling of their own family pet, such periodic killings have become part of the social landscape, justified to protect people against disease. As Krithika Srinivasan points out, while the United Kingdom is often praised for its entrenched system of animal welfare rules and India is often decried for its lack of legal protections, the former has strict animal control laws where officers quickly pick up any stray dogs (which are often killed in shelters if not claimed or adopted within a few days), whereas the latter often allows urban neighbourhood dogs or village dogs to live unmolested, and they are sometimes even fed by people.⁴¹ In China, there have been some rules about protecting wild animals, but very few historically about the protection and rights of domestic animals. Furthermore, China has not had a strict line between 'farm animals' (such as cows and pigs) and 'companion animals' (such as dogs and cats), which has long been the case in places like England. Nonetheless, we can see that even in the face of many restrictions, and at great personal effort and cost, many people in urban areas continued to keep dogs as pets throughout the Mao era. These numbers are expanding in recent times, and by the 1990s there was growing interest in the emergent animal rights movement.

A brief history of the modern Chinese small animal protection movement

It is difficult to pin down a date for the emergence of the modern Chinese small animal protection movement (小动物保护运动), but a loosely connected network of groups began to gain some traction by the first decade of the 2000s. They use the term 'small animal' to refer to pets such as cats and dogs, and to distinguish their efforts from the wildlife conservation movement, which has often focused in China on large animals such as panda bears and wild elephants. Notably, however, they did not choose the term 'pet' (*chongwu*). This term literally means a loved or spoiled thing, and was first coined in 1958 in the *People's Daily* newspaper as a critique of bourgeois sensibilities.⁴²

41 Srinivasan, 'The Biopolitics of Animal Being and Welfare'.

42 Jeffreys, 'Beijing Dog Politics'.

Currently, the movement is composed of international NGOs, nationally and locally registered groups, and individuals who are not active members of a specific animal rights group but still form social networks, often through the use of social media. One of the most notable large foreign NGOs is the International Fund for Animal Welfare, which first set up operations in China in 1994.⁴³ Nationally, the first animal protection group, the Small Animal Protection Association of China, had been created two years earlier. The vast majority of activists are connected with many smaller organisations and animal shelters that do not always have an official starting date, and many only last a few years. It is not uncommon for individual activists to say they have always cared about animal welfare, but only recently became directly involved in the movement. Small animal protection activists (行动派) and organisations can be found all over China, but they are most active in urban centres such as Beijing or Shanghai, and in the Pearl River Delta area. The movement is generally concerned with education, stopping the dog and cat meat trade, and pushing for legislation to protect small animals. Although this movement is concerned with a wide range of pets, in this paper we will focus on the Pearl River Delta region and how activists work to protect dogs.

As China does not currently have any national legislation to protect small domestic animals, activists must find a way to creatively utilise current laws to stop the dog meat trade. While the consumption of dog meat itself is legal in China, the methods used to obtain these animals *are* almost always illegal. The dog meat trade is primarily controlled by smugglers, often working in gangs, who steal pets and capture stray animals to supply the demand for dog meat. For this reason, activists call the dog meat trade a ‘black market’. As dogs are collected, they are brought to a central, hidden location, called a ‘black market den’. Once enough animals have been collected, they are loaded onto trucks to be transported to a slaughtering location. It is this label ‘black market’ that is key. Activists must find a way to officially label dog meat and abusive treatment as illegal, and then use this label to hold the government, law enforcement, businesses and dog smugglers accountable. Activists often achieve this by using the rhetoric of anti-corruption and citing health and safety concerns.

43 IFAW, which initially began in 1969 to stop the seal harvest in Canada, has since expanded into over 40 countries. Their work has primarily been about wildlife (which also includes addressing China's large industry of farming wildlife, such as the Asiatic black bear), mainly including Tibetan antelopes and elephants, but it has more recently worked on issues around companion animals, and also promoting the concept of ‘animal guardianship’, as opposed to ‘pet ownership’. While well-funded and prominent, foreign NGOs such as IFAW and the World Wide Fund for Nature, known in North America as the World Wildlife Fund (which, as its name implies, only addresses wildlife, and more from a population stance than an animal welfare stance), have had to work carefully in China, knowing that they could be asked to leave at any time, and watching some of their fellow NGOs be shut down: Jessica Batke, “‘The New Normal’ for Foreign NGOs in 2020”, *ChinaFile*, 3 January 2020, www.chinafile.com/ngo/analysis/new-normal-foreign-ngos-2020, accessed 21 October 2021.



Figure 2: Three people stop to talk to a volunteer at an information stand run by a Guangzhou-based animal protection group, 2016.

Source: Suzanne Barber.

There are three primary health concerns specific to the dog meat trade. The first are zoonotic diseases. While there have been no recorded zoonotic epidemics traced back to the dog meat trade, as will be shown later, activists still reference SARS and other zoonotic outbreaks in their push for legislation to make dog meat illegal. More recently, activists have started to also reference Covid-19. The second concern is how dogs are actually obtained by the smugglers. As Zhang Wei, an activist, explained:

Cats and dogs are different from pigs, cattle and sheep, which are regulated by the government and so are safe to eat. Most cats and dogs, however, are stolen or poisoned by criminals. This meat is unsafe and people even die after eating it. This means from a strictly food safety point of view the government needs to supervise the industry. But raising cats and dogs on breeding farms costs more than their meat is worth so there will never be a legal safe industry.

Zhang Wei points out that while there is a legal way for dogs to be raised for meat, it has already been shown that it will not replace the current 'black market' system. This is primarily due to the shrinking market for dog meat and the expense of raising dogs, making legal dog farming too expensive. Dogs are often poisoned to make them easier for smugglers to seize quickly and with less risk of injury to themselves.

Activists argue that corrupt officials purposely avoid enforcing food safety laws meant to prevent zoonosis. Accusations of corruption, when carried out with care, have proven to be an effective method. Corruption has long been a concern

in China, and anti-corruption drives have been at the centre of several sweeping campaigns. The most recent of these mass campaigns was led by Xi Jinping in 2012 when he announced what would be the largest organised anti-corruption campaign in national history. Although many feel that this campaign has been more about Xi consolidating his power than about clearing corrupt individuals out of the ranks of the Communist Party,⁴⁴ for activists, the actual reasons motivating the campaign hardly matter.

This political climate has offered a way for activists to latch onto the anti-corruption message to advance their own demands. The 'black market' dog meat trade flourishes in areas where smugglers are able to pay off police and local officials. Through these relationships, smugglers are able to bypass the required quarantine and meat inspections. Activists work to demonstrate that the dog meat supply chain violates a number of China's food safety and anti-epidemic laws. To do so, though, activists must identify dogs as existing on the same level as other livestock, and thus coming under the same laws. In order to achieve their goals, therefore, activists strategically withhold their own beliefs that dogs should never be eaten, and instead attempt to categorise dogs as a potential food in order to use these food safety laws to challenge their transportation.

Activists are able to point to specific locations where such corruption is a frequent occurrence and 'black market dens' are often located. Within the Pearl River Delta area, the city of Foshan has gained this reputation amongst the activists. They accused police and other local authorities in Foshan of ignoring quarantine procedure violations, and blamed both laziness and bribery for the problem. Zhaohui, an activist who had been involved with the movement for several years, explained:

There is a Chinese idiom that explains the situation, it is *guan guan xiang hu* (官官相护). It means that officials mutually protect each other. So, for example, you are a government official, they are a government official, so you will help each other. We've gone to Foshan so many times. It is a very dark place where people often are eating dog and cat meat. We have no solution for the situation because the government 'doesn't see it.' The government is involved, so it is hard to help the animals.

In order to challenge state officials' claims that they are unaware of the situation, activists work to ensure that they are unable to deny their awareness of this illegal activity. This work requires planning before activists carry out one of three main direct actions: stopping a smuggling truck, attempting to shut down a black market den, or confronting vendors at wet markets. Social media, particularly China's most popular form of digital communication, WeChat, is central to this process. One activist with a strong legal background, Xiuying, who works with a few others in

⁴⁴ Guilhem Fabre, 'Xi Jinping's Challenge: What Is Behind China's Anti-Corruption Campaign?', *Journal of Self-Governance and Management Economics* 5, no. 2 (2017): 7–28, doi.org/10.22381/JSME5220171.

Guangdong, said that she sends out a shortened version of the quarantine law on WeChat to help her peers when they are confronting police, with the hope that police will acknowledge the illegality of dog smuggling.

This remains challenging, however, for even the shortened version of these laws can span a large number of pages. To be effective, activists must be able to ascertain which specific articles of a law a smuggler is violating. Xiuying and others like her will often offer advice to activists as to which points of the law to focus on, depending upon the situation at hand. According to Xiuying, when a truck with dogs is stopped, smugglers are often violating parts three and six of Article 25 of the 'Animal Epidemic Prevention' law:

2016 inter-provincial transportation of animals without quarantine certification penalties: 'Animal Epidemic Prevention' Article 25 ...

(3) Animals and animal products that have not undergone the quarantine as required by law or fail to pass the quarantine ...

(6) Other animals and animal products that do not conform to the regulations of the administrative department for veterinary medicine under [the] State Council governing animal epidemic prevention ...

Using these laws to demand accountability is a two-part process. Activists must first stop the truck. This often involves one or more activists following the truck in their car and giving updates of the truck's location until enough activists are available to form a roadblock or find another way to force the truck to stop. Once the authorities arrive, activists show that the driver of the truck has failed to comply with Article 25, and demand that appropriate measures be taken. Using this method, activists are able to effectively label the transportation of these dogs as a smuggling operation involving black market livestock, and defend their actions as protecting the health of China's population. This method brings its own risks, as local officials have been known to occasionally confiscate and euthanise the dogs in question rather than release them to the activists who stopped the truck. An increasing number of truck drivers have also begun to carry weapons. The most common weapons activists reported seeing were clubs or bats, but knives and guns were also occasionally seen. In such cases where it is suspected that a truck driver has a weapon, activists generally take to WeChat to warn each other. Certain activists have gained a reputation for stopping armed truck drivers or confronting armed smugglers and black market dens, although many others will not get involved if there is a known chance of violence. When a truck is stopped and a weapon is discovered, activists attempt to get photographic evidence of the weapon as further proof of criminal activity: this was particularly true when the weapons in question were knives or guns.

To counteract activists, some truck drivers have taken to carrying forged quarantine certificates. When this occurs, Xiuying encourages activists to cite Article 79 of the 'Animal Epidemic Prevention' regulations, which states that carrying a forged quarantine label will result in the livestock being seized and a fine of between ¥3,000 and ¥30,000. This threat is used to convince the smuggler to hand over the dogs as a way to avoid fines they often cannot afford. Posting these laws allows activists to quote the regulations and, even more importantly, the penalties for violating them, to police or local government officials attempting to ignore the activists.

In cases where the corruption is to a degree that activists feel they cannot depend on support from local law enforcement, activists will often attempt to get the information out to the public before it can be covered up. During one truck stop, activists were instructed on WeChat: 'after you report to the police, be interviewed on TV and then also go to the Food and Drug Administration'. The activists were cautioned to reach out to reporters in the chaos of the initial stop, before they could be prevented from doing so by the police. Furthermore, they were told to make sure that information about the stop had already spread via social media before approaching the local government branch of the Food and Drug Administration. This, it was hoped, would make it difficult and risky for the local government to dismiss the situation at a time when food safety and health has remained a primary concern.

Activists were encouraged to emphasise the danger to both individuals as well as Chinese society as a whole. Occasionally, when activists had time to plan a confrontation, they would bring a film crew with them. This often served two purposes. It ensured that information about the event would be spread, but it also worked to reduce the risk of violence towards the activists.

Activists hope for national legislation to ban the consumption of dog meat, and ultimately a law protecting small domestic animals against abuse. Much like with their work to disrupt the dog meat 'black market', activists rely on anti-corruption rhetoric and concerns over health to push for such legislation. Within Guangdong Province, activists have used letter-writing campaigns to push for this legislation. In 2016, activists posted several different form letters on WeChat with instructions on how to customise the letters and send them to the appropriate official. These letters, sent en masse, prevent local officials from claiming they are unaware of the problem and demonstrate the growing displeasure of a population that is informed on the issue. These letters were carefully worded and praised higher-ranking and more powerful government officials, and directly critiqued only the police or very low-ranking officials.

One such letter was directed to Governor Hu Chunhua of the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee. The letter begins by immediately stating that the animal protection activists sending it are law-abiding citizens. From there the letter goes on to describe the social and health problems resulting from the 'black market' dog meat trade:

The formal inclusion of the rabies disease prevention quarantine system of dogs and cats is in name only. Guangdong and Guangxi are the main importers of dogs and cats, it is also the area with the highest prevalence of rabies in the whole country, which is closely linked to both the warm and humid climate in the south and the illegal operation of dog and cat smuggling. Illegal trafficking and slaughtering of dogs and cats have severely challenged the construction and enforcement of an animal quarantine system ... We cannot repeat the painful lessons from SARS and H7N9 [avian influenza]. In 2013 the Guangdong Food Safety Office issued a document: Dogs and cats that have not been issued the animal quarantine certificate are forbidden from entering the food distribution market. The decision to strictly enforce national laws and regulation[s] in order to ensure public food, health and safety, and maintain social order is a pioneering step by the government. However, the managing departments of the cities Meizhou, Foshan, Jieyang, Jiangmen etc. have disregarded the documents issued by the Guangdong Food and Drug Administration (粤食字 2013 document number 57) and have turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the circulation of illegal dogs and cats in the market ... Many times citizens reported that food and market operators made the false reply that law enforcement had already been to the scene and found no dogs and cats being sold. Some food safety and regulatory administrative department use [the excuse] 'there are no slaughtering rules for cats and dogs and therefore cat and dog meat does not need to be quarantined' as a reason to ignore the lawlessness of the dog and cat meat operations.

The activists must be very careful when criticising the government in such letters. Rather than blaming the governor himself for ignoring these regulations, the activists instead put the blame on low-level administrators and police for writing false reports in order to hide the problems and preventing the information from reaching higher authorities. Through this letter and others like it, activists are now informing the governor of the situation and preventing any claim of ignorance on his part. These letters do not focus on the animals as worthy of protection in and of themselves, but instead on the impact their theft and slaughter has on the health and safety of human citizens and, potentially, the political image of certain government officials. While large NGOs have always pushed to ban dog meat to some degree, those based within China have had to be careful with their rhetoric, frequently putting more emphasis on education of how to treat dogs in order to decrease consumption. When the question of the dog meat market was directly addressed, activists often focused on the infamous dog meat festival of Yulin. One notable exception to this pattern is Animals Asia, which some activists credited with first proving that many dogs from the dog meat trade were stolen. After the emergence of Covid-19, however, more

of these NGOs have taken a much more direct approach. The Animals for Asia Coalition, a working group made up of 23 NGOs, including the aforementioned Animals Asia, has worked together to approach the governments of several Asian countries, including China, to ban dog meat. These NGOs acknowledge that dogs are not a Covid-19 threat, but point to the many other diseases the dog meat trade is connected to. They argue that just focusing on wildlife and Covid-19 is problematic, and is only temporarily solving a problem. Rather, they argue that governments should also use this moment to address the dog meat trade, which has the potential to spread the far deadlier zoonotic disease, rabies.⁴⁵

Rabies presents a particular challenge to activists. As previously mentioned, China, with the goal of eliminating rabies within its borders by 2025, has initiated a number of highly aggressive measures, including dog culls. Thus for activists, their primary complaint has not been lack of response, but rather the type of response. Activists do not dispute the danger of rabies to public health, but rather attempt to change the methods and laws utilised by the government in its attempt to control rabies. In conversation, activists would point out that dog culls frequently have nothing to do with rabies control, but rather the local government's concern over how stray dogs affect the image of the city. These culls, they point out, increase in frequency before a major international event. Furthermore, while the majority of rabies cases occur in rural locations, these culls are concentrated in urban locations, often in rapidly gentrifying neighbourhoods. Activists focus on implementing education and vaccination campaigns.

While activists write letters to local officials urging them to stop culls, they must be particularly careful when a cull is clearly connected to an important event. Li Min, an activist based in Hangzhou, described an attempt by activists to stop a dog cull at Zhejiang University before the G20 summit in 2016. The protest centred around a female dog that had lived on the campus for seven years. Li Min explained:

When they caught her, she was going to be euthanised, but dogs in China aren't really euthanised, they are killed in such an inhumane way. But she is more than just a life on campus, she is part of the campus culture and history ... So, we found a lot of people who wanted to save her and called the Department of Urban Management.

Activists had to supply a reason for why the dog cull was problematic, and unlike with dog meat dens, this reason had to be distinctly separate from public health. Li Min, along with other activists, emphasised the dog's cultural importance to the campus. She had already been living there for seven years and had never shown

⁴⁵ Humane Society International 'China continues reforms in wake of coronavirus crisis: confirms dogs are pets not meat; Wuhan, Beijing ban eating wildlife' (2020), blog.humanesociety.org/2020/06/china-continues-reforms-in-wake-of-coronavirus-crisis-confirms-dogs-are-pets-not-meat-wuhan-beijing-ban-eating-wildlife.html, accessed 22 October 2021.

any aggression. Activists have worked to create educational material to reinforce their letter-writing campaigns and dog meat truck stops. These educational campaigns range from informal social media posts to humane education programs for elementary schools. Additionally, these education campaigns focus on teaching people how to approach stray dogs to reduce the risk of being bitten, and push for owners to vaccinate and sterilise their dogs and cats. Activists in Guangdong Province have started to see some success from their methods of emphasising public health. Shortly after the letter-writing campaigns in 2016, activists began to get responses from the government acknowledging these letters, which they immediately posted in the WeChat groups. One letter from the Guangdong Food and Drug Administration promised:

Our bureau will continue to strengthen the supervision of cat and dog meat. The law severely punishes operations failing to follow regulations through unqualified meat quarantine or quarantine violations. We have convened the relevant departments and experts to explore the province's cat and dog meat regulations and research to strengthen and standardize the province's cat and dog meat supervision and find effective measures. If you find relevant suspected violations, please continue to report [them] to us. Thank you for your concern and support for the food regulatory work!

The activists immediately joked about the formulaic response, but still viewed it as an overall success for the movement. While the letter itself could only superficially show that the government was holding those who violate food safety laws accountable for their actions, such a response prevented higher-level officials from claiming complete ignorance of these illegal activities. The responses the activists received, much like the letters they originally sent, acknowledged the possibility that the higher-level officials may not be informed about dog meat smuggling events due to local official corruption. This strategy created a built-in scapegoat that helped to prevent the letter from coming across as threatening the political and social position of higher officials, and allowed both sides to continue their work.

Following the outbreak of Covid-19, activists have had their greatest success in stopping the dog meat trade in Guangdong Province. On 1 April 2020 Shenzhen announced new food safety regulations in response to Covid-19. While the majority of these regulations addressed the consumption, sale and breeding of wildlife, dog and cat meat was also permanently banned.⁴⁶ Shenzhen became the first city in China to ban dog and cat meat. Following Shenzhen, Zhuhai, where the educational organisation ACTAsia is based, also banned dog meat.

46 Qin Amy, 'In fight to ban dog meat, China's activists find an ally: the coronavirus', *The New York Times*, 23 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/world/asia/china-dog-meat.html, accessed 22 October 2021.

Conclusion

China's animal rights activists have come up with novel ways to directly intervene as dog protectors, and do so at great risk. Their direct actions have been inspiring to many animal rights activists around the world, and they have caused many to rethink existing assumptions that people in China have no regard for the lives of other animals, as ethical judgement about Chinese animal consumption has been a mainstay of forms of Orientalism for centuries.

These activists carry out these actions in challenging times, as there is a wider crackdown on organisations that challenge the status quo. Social movement organisations have felt a chilling wind, and in these new times international groups have felt especially vulnerable. These kinds of new 'flash mobs', organised by WeChat, that seem to rise and fall spontaneously, might herald a more sustainable form of organisation, more mycelial than grassroots, without any official or permanent structure.

Very recently, some of these activists have celebrated new national and city-level legislation, the former moving dogs into a new legal category of a companion animal, with associated rights, and the latter explicitly outlawing the eating of dogs. As this paper has shown, they have worked by using existing state laws that were mainly motivated by the fear of food contagion and the spread of epidemic disease, especially zoonotic disease. With SARS and Covid-19, such fears of diseases moving between other animals and humans has become all too real. Despite their successes, activists have their work cut out for them. China's pet industry is booming, so there are many unregulated pet breeders who are producing millions of new animals every year. The incidence of the practices of neutering, spaying and immunising against rabies is relatively low and uneven, so this means that abandoned animals are likely to find each other, mate and quickly increase in numbers, which tends to lead in turn to large-scale culls. As there is almost no official network of animal control centres, where free-roaming animals are captured and kept, or where pet guardians who no longer want to care for their animals can place them for adoption, there are no easy solutions to this major issue of millions of dogs without homes, that signals to state officials a sense of threat. Establishing such a network of shelters has been part of the quiet, hard work of animal rights activities in China who have been working at great personal cost to try to bring dogs into a secure status as a cherished companion animal in a permanent way.

This text is taken from *International Review of Environmental History*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2022, edited by James Beattie and Brett Bennett, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/IREH.08.01.2022.04