

Man's Best Dish

China contemplates a dog meat ban

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IT'S ALMOST UNHEARD OF to find dog in Nanjing in August. The crammed stalls of the downtown wet market won't sell what they refer to as "fragrant meat" until winter, when the humidity won't turn a person's skin wet in seconds. But at the end of the metro line and a bus ride away in the outlying town of Fangshan, the turquoise banner over the Hun Dan restaurant reads "Hun Dan Gou Rou." *Hun dan* means bastard; *gou rou* means dog meat.

Nanjing is quickly becoming a cosmopolitan city, with a population

the size of New York. It was China's capital until 1949, and has the highest concentration of students of any city in China. It's a hub of animal rights activity.

It's also a place where different cultures within China collide, and coexist. In Nanjing, Chinese students and artists insist to me, their foreign friend, that no one eats dog. But a local restaurant owner, Cang Guanghui, enthusiastically recommends Hun Dan, and explains that the name is a familiar epithet. "That's how they scold the dogs!" he laughed.

In May, a research team led by Chang Jiwen submitted draft legislation to the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China that would ban eating dog and cat. Restaurant owners found to be in violation would face a \$7,000 fine and 15 days in police custody.

While the law awaits approval, online debate has revealed just how split the issue is. A poll of over 140,000 people on the news site Sina indicates that 51.5 % of voters supported the law, while 45.6 percent doubted it could be enforced. The split is not

purely an urban versus rural debate. For all its progressive intellectualism, Nanjing itself serves as a busy trade corridor between two other thriving metropolitan customers of the dog meat trade: Shanghai and Guangdong. The fight is effectively one between progressives who consider dog meat an embarrassment for a rapidly developing country and traditionalists who find it delicious when stewed or boiled. On the website for the Chinese newspaper *Global Times*, a Beijinger asked sarcastically, “Why don’t you ban the eating of pigs or sheep?”

According to An Xiang, a lawyer for a government legal aid organization in Beijing, those animals which are protected by China, like the panda, are not protected out of concern for their suffering, but because they are valuable resources. The meat industry as a whole in China is only just beginning to consider humane slaughter an issue worth pursuing. Meanwhile, according to culinary folklore among small-time meat producers, dog meat is said to be more tender when the dog is skinned alive or beaten to death.

The tumult over banning dog meat in China has yet to touch Hun Dan. The farmer who supplies the restaurant continues to drop off dogs. They’re delivered live, and a specialist arrives to kill them later. “But they’re food dogs,” the manager, Xu Gongrong, emphasized. “*Cai gou*.”

There are three classes of dogs in China: food dogs (raised for eating), street/wild dogs, and pet dogs. Raised for strength and size, *cai gou* are descended from Akitas brought over by the Japanese hundreds of years ago.

According to Animals Asia, an estimated 10 million dogs are killed in China for food every year. Eating dog is both a business and a tradition. Xu Gongrong brushed off the suggestion



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of a ban. “China will never pass a law like that,” she said quickly, going back to her mahjong game. “We have a tradition of eating dogs for thousands of years.”

The pull of tradition can explain why a dog meat bill has only been introduced now, long after speculation that serving dog would be banned before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Grace Ge Gabriel, who offered consultation on the draft law, believes that the proposed law will serve as “a stone to test the waters.” Gabriel is the regional director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare and sees the recent boom in pet ownership and animal rescue groups as a sign of the changing economic and social climate.

As of 2010, there are approximately 280.3 million pets in China, a 7.5% increase from 2005, according to Euromonitor International. Spending on pet care in China will near a billion dollars in 2010. Pet stores have recently begun to crop up in Nanjing — places where ambivalent-looking shopkeepers hoping to cash in on the growing market keep dogs in tiny metal cages. These dogs will later be dyed clownish colors and wear gift wrap-style bows as luxury “designer dogs.”

The rise of pets in China has in fact fueled the dog meat trade. In some instances, surplus dogs from pet stores end up at meat markets, said Dr. Sharon Methvin of Mount Hood College, who has conducted research on the dog trade in Nanjing. In other instances, stolen pets can also fetch a price at meat markets like Hui Min Qiao Market in northern Nanjing.

Hui Min Qiao reeks of feces and raw meat. Blood pools on the swampy floors. At one stall on an August afternoon, a man tore back the coat off a freshly killed dog, slitting open

the neck then moving on to the face, slipping the fur off the flesh so smoothly that it looked as though he was peeling off a costume. The meat sells for about \$1 a pound year round. These are not cai gou a restaurant with means would buy, but *tu gou*, or field dogs, rounded up from the countryside. Medium-sized with coats ranging from black to brown, they look

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like small hyenas.

In a tunnel at the back of the market, live dogs wait behind metal bars, under posters of golden retrievers basking in green hillsides. The operators of the stalls drink beer and watch portable TVs next to huge vats spiked with prongs meant to remove the fur off the carcasses. The dogs here don’t look especially like cai gou or tu gou. One is barely over a foot long with moppy, white hair.

Methvin traveled here often to buy obviously stolen dogs with Pingan, an animal rights group that has also staged public shamings of known animal abusers in front of their homes.

While activist groups and the underground dog meat trade continue to expand, the average person in Nanjing has heard of neither. Even those Chinese who don’t eat dog are not guaranteed to be in favor of animal rights. Likely changing culture, more than changing ethics, will be the ultimate arbiter of the dog trade.

“I feel like in 25 years, you won’t really have people who eat dog [in China],” Methvin says. “People under

the age of fifty do not eat dog. They’re eating McDonald’s and KFC.”

But that also depends on one more delicate question: Is dog meat worth it? My order at Hun Dan looked no different than any other stew I’d tried in China, the dark meat bobbing up and down among a mix of green onions.

I thought the first bite would be the hardest, but it was actually the second.

Only then could I really understand why China is so torn up over dog meat.

I was also torn. I grew up in America, where there was never any question that dogs were friends, not food. I just had no idea they’d taste so good. 🍖