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A Story about a Taiwanese Culinary Practice and Law

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Professor Hutt

A Story about a Taiwanese Culinary Practice and Law

Zhang Xin-Rong liked nothing better in the winter months than to consume the tasty meat of dogs. As a rule, he preferred puppies to adults; but amongst the latter, he found that a muscular large-boned dog was often much more appetizing than a smaller, stringier creature. Color, of course, was important, traditionally so, for the health: black best, yellow second best, then white, then everything else. Pedigree not so important, although certain breeds he knew to have been engineered especially for the table: the Chihuahua (strangely Chinese-sounding), the Black Tongue Chow—

—

Nephew Lin! Over there! Next to the big tureen.

— even the Swiss St. Bernard, which at that very moment was being cross-bred and husbanded in Shanxi province, according to an article he had read in a mainland newspaper, “for its big and strong bodily form and loins.” Switzerland he had always imagined as a terrain of enormous, intraversable lakes and mountains; it made sense that that country should produce the world’s largest dog.

Nephew Lin carried a tall aluminum pot joltingly across the kitchen and bounced it down onto the table, where the black-brown stew inside the pot, a foot deep, lurched forward but somehow did not spill. Nephew

Lin, eyes so small and slitty that he looked like a cat on the verge of sleep, wiped his hands on the cloth tucked into his waist and went and sat where he always did, by the radio in the corner. He had stopped wondering why Zhang called him nephew; neither of his parents were related to his boss, and neither were on familiar terms with him, either. Zhang called him nephew, but Lin had never once replied “Yes, Uncle?”

In Switzerland, his boss mused, shepherds used to dry and cure dog meat like bacon and then carry the *Hundeschinken* in small pouches to snack on as they roamed the snowy Alpine peaks and valleys with their flocks.

Zhang Xin-Rong was the owner of a ten-table restaurant near Taiwan University, in a quiet lane off Roosevelt Road, section 4. He had arranged its purchase twelve years before from the brother of a school friend, an ambitious type who was giving up the restaurant business to sell computer programs. CD-ROMs had made the friend’s brother rich over the years, but that had not stopped him from returning to his old domain once or twice every month, ostensibly to see that everything was still running smoothly. But it was obvious that he just missed the run of the place. And although Zhang was not an unctuous man, it gave him pleasure to hear his predecessor, whom he still respectfully called “Laoban” (Boss), make approving comments about Zhang’s tenure and speak nostalgically of the old days. Perhaps for that reason, Zhang hadn’t changed the look of restaurant much those twelve years. Still the formica topped tables and the metal stools, in the same arrangement as ever, the pictures of film stars cut out of magazines and pasted onto the walls, the pale blue light of the mosquito zapper by the door; still the TV, always on, no sound, on a shelf at the rear of the dining room. And still the frayed, laminated “guests’ menu,” available to acquaintances and those in the know, offering the seasonal fragrant meat delicacies Zhang and Laoban and almost all Taiwanese knew to be dog meat.

*

In the summer, when all of Taipei – all of Taiwan, for that matter – is swimming in a sultry thick soup of humidity, many residents of the city take the short trip to Yangmingshan, a mountainous park forming the northern edge of town, in order to enjoy the cooler air of its higher slopes and summit. In November, when temperatures in the city fall to as low as the high forties, it can be downright cold up there. On the lower slopes of Yangmingshan, rich Taiwanese and foreigners reside in American-style villas and housing developments gated off amidst the lush greenery and steep declivities, abundant in views down to the grey shining city.

Near these residences, you can also find Zhongguo Wenhua Daxue, or Chinese Cultural University, and its twenty-two thousand or so students majoring in disciplines as diverse as Chinese opera, classical literature, the thought of Sun Yat-Sen (to which an entire institute has been dedicated), and meteorology. Its rather lofty elevation (460m) and the palatial appearance of many of its buildings have made the university, Taiwan's largest, something of a national landmark. Take a few steps down the hill from those grand structures and expansive courtyards, though, and you will suddenly find yourself in a mazy, slanting cluster of streets lined with small restaurants and convenience stores and moving with the roving crowds of students those businesses cater to. Here is where most of the commuters to the university daily leave their cars and motorcycles (there never being any space on the campus itself); here was where, that unusually cold November afternoon, Lu Ting-Ting was wandering about, wondering where she had parked her motorscooter just a few hours earlier. She owned a maroon, Shangwei model. That description, unfortunately, fit about fifteen scooters she had

already seen which were not hers; she had placed a large sticker of the sun on the rear mudguard precisely for that reason. But she had seen no sun, no rear mudguard, so far, just a long and messy line of motorcycles and scooters, other people retrieving their own, putting on helmets, talking on cellphones motoring off waving goodbye to friends. . .

Ting-Ting remembered the words and melody of the scene they had just studied in lecture and sang it out loud as she walked. She practiced the sweeping, twisting movement of the arms, the stylized gesture she had been taught in the acting class before that. Her rendition was less than perfect, she knew. The Chinese opera students were divided into actors and theorists, and she was a theorist; but they still made the theorists act, and the actors learn a little theory. It was always amusing to the actors, some of whom, like Ah-Wei, were semi-professional already, when the theorists failed to master the simplest movement, something so simple the actors could probably do it in their sleep, if called to. Ah-Wei had such a clear voice, was a wonderful acrobat, and in a blinding display of skill could twirl weapons around herself while tumbling and leaping. Ting-Ting, well, she could write a decent thesis about it. She sang the high, flickering melody again and it was only once she had finished the part and looked down from the white sky that her eyes fell directly onto the mudguard of the maroon scooter in front of which she had halted, and whence the sun smiled obtusely at her.

*

No less an authority than Hippocrates, the classical father of Western medicine, believed that a repast of dog meat could restore vitality to those whose *qi* was on the wane. Furthermore, puppy was considered an elegant offering by ancient Roman nobility, whilst the Phoenicians (the inventors of crucifixion) were known

to have roasted theirs.

Zhang shifted on his seat as Nephew Lin deposited a clear plastic bag full of black-brown stew next to him on the counter before shuffling back into the kitchen. Zhang placed the bag in a polystyrene bowl along with a plastic spoon and a pair of chopsticks, put all of this into a larger plastic bag, and then handed it over to the waiting customer.

–

Beef stew? Zhang asked.

– Right, beef stew, thank you.

– Thank you. Hey, take it easy. Bye-bye.

– Bye-bye.

The English explorer Captain James Cook and his crew had come across dog-eating natives in the Pacific Islands. Fijians and Samoans used to roast dog “luau-style”; the captain had tried a roast leg and had subsequently written in his journal of its agreeable, mutton-like savor. Of course, once they had colonized the islands, they banned the practice. In Vietnam

– Boss.

chefs sautéed chops in white wine, to create a rather pleasant *chien au vin*, and in certain areas they also offered a spicy sausage whose filling included peppers, herbs, and a mixture of pork and dog. Zhang himself had managed to sample one of the latter

–

Hey, boss.

at Golden Wind Restaurant, off Chunghsiao E. Road. Famously, in the Chinese culinary tradition, dog meat was claimed to be efficacious at keeping out the cold. But Zhang had read in a dictionary of Medical Practice that it might have other beneficial effects, such as “nourishing Yin, tonifying the kidney, improving human health, nourishment and physiological regulation for the entire human body.”

– Hey, boss.

But most saliently, there was the taste: less fatty than mutton, with shorter fibers than beef or chicken, and a delicate aroma, hence the name “fragrant meat,” although some people insisted that it was a euphemism–

–

Uncle Zhang!

Zhang turned around to see squint-eyed Nephew Lin framed in the doorway of the kitchen, clapping his hands in front of him in an awkward way. Zhang was irritated to have had his train of thought interrupted.

– Nephew Lin, why so much noise? I am serving the customers.

– Boss!

– What is it?

– Boss, there’s something on the radio. The government.

*

Ting-Ting sped around the turns of the road winding down from the university and shivered a little from the chill. The mountain maintained its dense greenness year-round; in the cold, the heavy plants and trees on either side of the road appeared somewhat dark and ominous. She burrowed her face a little deeper into her scarf.

At the foot of Yangmingshan, traffic takes you through Tienmu, an affluent American enclave sheltering such expatriate institutions as the Taipei American School, Mary's Hamburgers, and a full-service Haagen-Dazs. Ting-Ting scooted by the last of these, noticed it, made a quick, impulsive decision, and then pulled an abrupt U-turn at the traffic lights.

She always liked the smell of the place upon entering – clean, warm (or cool in the summer), slightly sweetened. She liked the art nouveau stylings of the interior and the plush velvet banks to sit on at the tables. And the idea of waiter service at an ice-cream parlor tickled her. She was seated by a waitress in a striped blouse and a black skirt, and was then brought a menu and a steaming cup of tea.

The dining room was empty – it was an early evening at the beginning of winter, after all – but Ting-Ting preferred it that way, quiet and empty, with the day darkening outside. She opened the menu and examined the selections carefully, although she almost always ordered the same thing – the Coffee Desert with the espresso on the side, please. She ordered. She waited. When the waitress returned with her ice cream, Ting-Ting thanked her politely and looked at the plate. There were three balls of ice cream, as usual, two white and one brown, in a triangular formation. Surrounding them, a thin line of chocolate sauce, and beneath, two rolled cigarillo biscuits. On a smaller plate to the side, a cup of espresso steamed gently. She picked up the cup and poured a little of the coffee over the ice-cream, watching the steam rise and the color of the vanilla darken. She spread the napkin on her lap and picked up her spoon.

She stared at the desert a little longer, then shaved off a spoonful of ice cream from one of the balls of vanilla. Her face was tilted over the plate as she brought the spoon to her mouth, as if she were peering into

a pool of water. Tasting the ice cream, she raised her head and her eyes looked up pensively. The flavor of the coffee and the sweetness of the ice cream mingled on her tongue, and she nodded in agreement. It was always the first mouthful of any meal or desert that she lingered over and enjoyed the most; after that, eating seemed to be something of a chore. She waited until that first taste had disappeared completely, then finished the desert quickly and precisely. Night had fallen. Ting-Ting left and rode home through the city.

Taipei is a city of seemingly endless signs and streets. In most areas, low concrete buildings, five or six stories at most, predominate, and in their water-stained and uneven state give the city a huddled, enclosed feeling. Elsewhere, office blocks and skyscrapers exert a more regular influence. Trees and other plants are a rare sight in Taipei's public spaces; instead, you spot them growing in small courtyards behind the walls of apartment buildings, and on rooftops and balconies, private affairs. You will see signs, though, throughout – names of businesses, advertisements, enticements and other information, messages that in other cities might not be conveyed literally. These Chinese characters, painted or done up in neon or illuminated plastic, on a background of drab, grey concrete and steel: this conjunction seems to express the essence of the city.

It is thus a largely monotonous and visually unclassifiable experience to travel through Taipei during the day, for the unique charm of the city generally comes from the inventiveness and graft of its population, not its material appearance. At night, however, the physical image of Taipei changes somewhat. The signs light up; the buildings retreat. Ting-Ting rode through the illuminated streets that night and felt the power of her movement, its purpose and direction. The lit signs flew behind her on either side and seemed to form a corridor of changing and merging color around her concentrated velocity. The scooter buzzed beneath her; the cold air rushed at her face. She had a strange and happy sense of freedom as she rode, and at that moment saw something of the beauty of her city, a fugitive quality detectable only, if ever, by the moving observer, the speeding observer, at night.

Arriving at her building, Ting-Ting parked her motorscooter next to several others and walked into the lobby. The building supervisor was at his desk, where he was for most of every day, eating rice out of a metal canteen. His attention was fixed on the small television to his right; he scarcely acknowledged Ting-Ting's greeting as she entered. She walked past him, checked their mailbox (it was empty), then rode the lift up to the seventeenth floor.

Ting-Ting entered her home – modern, modest – to find her mother and a male friend watching television as well. She had seen the man in their apartment before. Her mother had prepared a pot of tea and had brought out some sweets and snacks, all of which now sat on the coffee table in front of them.

–

Hey, Ting-Ting, have you eaten?

– Yes, Ma, I had something on the way home.

– Are you still hungry? I can make you something. . .

– No, Ma, I'm not hungry.

– I've already given Tangyuan something to eat.

– Okay.

The man on the sofa was flipping through channels on the TV. He turned around to grin at her. Ting-Ting supposed that he lived in one of the other apartments in the building. Her mother was always entertaining someone or other. After her parents had divorced, her mother had started to invite people over in a neighborly fashion almost every day; just for the company, Ting-Ting assumed in the beginning. But now she was certain that some of those guests had intentions beyond simple friendship, and that her mother had feelings of her own in this regard. Ting-Ting could never tell the admirers and friendly neighbors apart, however.

Her room was about three and a half large steps long and two and a half wide. Piles of books crowded a low desk, while clothes spilled out from an overmatched closet. Above that, an air-conditioning unit was wedged into the window. On the back of the door, she had hung a movie poster, a grainy, greenish photo of a couple entangled in each other, titled by the words “Happy Together,” in English and Chinese. Her bed was narrow and covered with different kinds of sheets and blankets, small furry animals and pillows. To the side of the bed, there was a table, a metal lamp and more books; tucked underneath that was a compact stereo. Ting-Ting switched off the fluorescent light overhead and turned on the bedside lamp. She lay down on the bed and her hand drifted down below the table to switch on the stereo.

As the music came on, her eyes closed. A blissful few seconds of rest passed before Tangyuan emerged from beneath the bed and stared at her. He barked once; Ting-Ting did not stir. He barked again.

– Eh, Tangyuan? Shh. Ting-Ting is tired.

The black and white dog jumped up onto the bed and sniffed at her.

– Tangyuan!

She reached up and petted his head. She opened her eyes to look at the little dog.

– Tangyuan, shake my hand.

The dog placed a paw in her hand and she shook it vigorously. When she let it go, the dog jumped off the bed and ran out the door, which was warped and could not be firmly closed. Tangyuan was a wild dog; that is to say, he was a street dog that Ting-Ting had taken in, but had not managed to domesticate. As such, Tangyuan was always liable to bark obstinately, run away, disappear for days, get into fights with other street dogs, be unaffectionate to his hosts upon return.

When Ting-Ting first met her dog, he looked a little the worse for wear. His coat was thin and patchy; he was skinny; something had bitten off his tail. He had followed her around as she bought groceries, then had waited for her in the street while she browsed inside a bookstore. She brought him home and gave him

something to eat. Then, of course, he wouldn't leave, and her mother yelled about his running around, his smell, and his climbing onto the shrine in their living room, while Ting-Ting's younger brother decided he liked him and tried to make him drink some whiskey. But in the end her mother decided she liked him as well. He wasn't hard to care for, after all: he was out most of the day and only came back to the apartment when he was hungry. Ting-Ting put a red collar around his neck and named him after a sweet, soupy Taiwanese dish that she thought of whenever she looked at him, but didn't know why.

Tangyuan had left her door slightly ajar. Ting-Ting could see the man in the living room saying his good-byes. Her mother saw him to the door. Ting-Ting left her bedroom once he had left, then sat down cross-legged on the sofa and watched her mother clear away the tea and sweets on the coffee table. Tangyuan appeared again and joined her on the sofa.

–

Ma.

– Yes?

– Who was that person?

– That was Mr. Zhou. He lives in one of the other buildings. He brought me these candies.

– Oh.

– Hey, Ting-Ting.

– What?

– Some of us might go down to Tainan next week.

– Oh.

Ting-Ting stroked the fur between her dog's ears. The dog yawned appreciatively.

–

What day next week? she asked.

– Wednesday or Thursday.

Her younger brother had come home. He was taking off his shoes in the small space between the front and inner doors. Tangyuan leapt up to greet him, but her brother didn't respond; and that meant he was in a mood. Ting-Ting sensed this and decided to needle him a little.

–

Hey, di-di.

– What?

– Hey, di, why were you smoking cigarettes in my room with your friends?

– I wasn't.

– It smelled of cigarettes in my room yesterday and I found a cigarette end on my desk this morning.

– It wasn't mine.

– Whose was it, then?

– I dunno. Ask Ma, she was in the house all day.

A voice came out of the kitchen, joining in.

– Hey, di-di, you shouldn't be smoking cigarettes with your friends in your sister's room.

Ting-Ting looked at her brother.

– Shit! he shouted. I hate this house.

Ting-Ting's brother went into his room and slammed the door. Half a minute later, she heard his music on, very loud. Ting-Ting curled her legs beneath her and began to stroke Tangyuan between his ears again.

*

–
Impossible! said Laoban.

– Unbelievable! said Zhang.

Both men stood in an unaccustomed position, crowding around Nephew Lin's radio in the corner of the kitchen. Laoban had driven over in his BMW as soon as he had got wind of the news. Nephew Lin sat on his stool, surprised by all the sudden activity and excitement. All three listened to the news report again.

~ *Dog meat lovers beware – the practice of eating dog meat in Taiwan is soon to be banned. Lawmakers have given their initial approval to revisions to the Animal Protection Law of 1998 that would prohibit the slaughter and consumption of dogs and cats. The changes would also make it illegal to kill domestic animals for their fur, with violations carrying a fine amounting to more than NT\$300.*

~ *Wang Sing-Nan, a DPP lawmaker who was behind some of the amendments, said Tuesday that he hopes they can be passed before the start of winter. Two more readings in the legislature are necessary before the changes can become law.*

~ *The proposed package of measures would also expand existing anti-cruelty regulations to include Tai-*

wan's one million-strong population of stray dogs. Cruelty to animals carries a maximum fine of just under NT\$1600. The plight of these unlucky animals was recently brought to international attention by the famous martial arts actor Steven Seagal, who made a fact-finding mission to Taipei in May 1998 on behalf of PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

~ By tradition, hearty meals of dog meat, said by some to be very nutritious, are served in specialty restaurants during the winter months because such meals are said to keep out the cold.

~ However, the practice has been increasingly frowned upon by society. A recent survey found that 86.4% of people in Taipei opposed eating dog meat, while 5.1% said they saw nothing wrong with it. The remaining 8.5% expressed no opinion.

- Unbelievable! repeated Zhang.
- Damn that pig Steven Seagal! cursed Laoban.
- 86.4 percent . . . that can't be accurate, said Zhang.
- Useless legislature always interfering with other people's damn business! said Laoban.
- What's the difference between eating a pig and eating a dog? asked Zhang. It's purely cultural.
- No respect for culture, those DPP idiots! said Laoban.

Laoban scratched his scalp anxiously. Nephew Lin fidgeted with the volume control on his radio.

-

Should I throw away the fragrant meat in the freezer, boss? asked Nephew Lin.

- Don't be stupid, boy! exclaimed Laoban. We must conserve the little that we have. The market supply is sure to dry up now, with this news.

He scratched his scalp again.

– I'm going to make some phone calls.

Laoban walked briskly into the dining room, taking his cellphone out from inside the breast pocket of his jacket. Meanwhile, Zhang reassured Lin that Laoban was just on edge and angry at the government.

Laoban returned to the kitchen a few minutes later with a serious expression on his face. He beckoned Zhang over.

– I've just spoken to Mr. Wei, he said in a low voice.

– What did Wei say? Zhang asked.

– He said he's not selling any more dog until the law is settled one way or another. And he feels the revisions will probably be passed. That Wang Sing-Nan doesn't know what he's doing!

–

Hmm, what do you think we should do now? It seems that we should just stop serving those dishes. If Wei won't sell us any more cuts, I won't be able to, anyway.

–

Zhang Xin-Rong, don't speak of it! urged Laoban. Nothing will change. We just have to be self-reliant. So Wei won't sell us any more dog. . .

And he beckoned Nephew Lin over.

*

There was a game that Ting-Ting played with her dog almost every morning. Driving away from the apartment building on her scooter, she would invariably find Tangyuan running eagerly alongside her. If the road were clear (as it was most mornings), Ting-Ting would accelerate quickly and her dog would soon curl off from the pursuit; she would see him in the side mirror, at first staring at her forlornly from the side of the road, then turning to sniff at the gutter. On the other hand, if she were to slow down for some reason, or to stop for a traffic light, then Tangyuan would leap onto the scooter, settle down by her feet, and Ting-Ting, according to the rules, would have to let him accompany her wherever she happened to be going. The game had caused no end of inconvenience in the past, what with Tangyuan getting lost on Yangmingshan, or making a mess in front of someone's house, or nipping a friend's already skittish pet on the rear; Ting-Ting still liked to play it.

Late the morning following the scene with her brother about the cigarette end, Ting-Ting headed out to meet her friend Jessie at Tai Da, National Taiwan University. It being a Friday, Ting-Ting had no classes. Her brother had left the apartment in the middle of the night, and had not returned by the time she left that morning; she felt sorry and guilty about that, and was not concentrating all that well as she drove away. And so before she could do anything about it, a flying black and white creature landed at her feet and immediately started to lick its chops rather contentedly.

Jessie walked out of the lecture hall in a crowd of students to see her friend Ting-Ting slapping a small dog on its head.

- What's he done? asked Jessie (in English).
- He want to *da bian* all around here, replied Ting-Ting (also in English).
- So why did you bring him? (In Chinese again)
- He won.
- Oh.

Jessie was a student of English at Tai Da, and spoke the language almost flawlessly. Her lecture had been on Marlowe. Ting-Ting and all her friends called her “Da Niu,” or “Big Cow,” which was a little unfair, because Jessie was tall and slender, albeit that she did have short hair and a low voice.

They started to walk towards the cafeteria. They chatted for a while, then Ting-Ting mentioned:

–

Da Niu, I am worried about my brother.

– What are you worried about?

– All he does is drink and smoke every day. He hangs around all the time with those stupid guys. You know, my father sends him money every month.

– You told me that before. How much money does your father give him?

– My father never sends me any money. I don’t want it. But it’s not enough, anyway, di-di is always short of money. He got a job, you know that? He got a job delivering milk. You know, the stuff in those plastic pouches. He had to deliver it to people’s doors. Anyway, last week we found all the milk he was supposed to be delivering stuffed under his bed.

– And it was probably all spoiled, right?

– I dunno, we left it there. And yesterday I found a cigarette end in my room. So I said . . . Hey . . . where did Tangyuan go?

She looked around her; the wayward pooch had disappeared.

– Oh, no, he has run off somewhere again!

The two separated to search for the pet astray. Ting-Ting walked around the area calling out the name of her dog, bent over as though she expected he would appear on the ground all of a sudden. Jessie, taller and

more logical, stayed upright to look farther afield. As she scanned around her, she caught sight of a boy on a bicycle with one hand struggling to keep something contained in the front basket. She looked again, more clearly now: a slow-limbed, prune-eyed boy on a bicycle making off with Tangyuan in the direction of Roosevelt Road.

*

Laoban and Zhang Xin-Rong were seated at a table in the dining room sharing a tall bottle of Taiwan Beer when Nephew Lin ducked under the half-raised sliding front and entered, red in the face, having left his bicycle to clatter to the ground outside. He carried a small dog under his arm. He was all sweaty despite the cold.

– Hey, boss.

Laoban reached out and relieved Lin of his burden.

– Let me have a look at that one, he said eagerly, grasping the dog by its collar.

– Nephew Lin, where did you find that? asked Zhang.

Lin was not able to reply, because two girls had entered the restaurant in the same way he had and squeezed past him just as he was about to speak, a tall dark-skinned girl with a boy's haircut, and then behind her, a short, pretty one who appeared out of breath and angry. That quieted him.

– Your boy stole my dog! said Ting-Ting to the two men, pointing over her shoulder at Lin.

– Uh... , said Zhang.

– Is this your dog? asked Laoban.

He dangled Tangyuan by the neck in front of her. The dog whined.

– Yes! Put him down! snapped Ting-Ting.

Laoban released the creature, who appeared at first to run to its owner, but then made a mad dash for the exit. Ting-Ting grabbed him by the collar and scooped him up.

– Sorry about that. The boy didn't know that it was your dog, offered Laoban.

– What was he doing? asked Ting-Ting.

– He was running around like a wild dog, blurted Lin from behind her.

– Couldn't you see his collar? Wild dogs don't have collars.

– Well, you have him back now, said Laoban.

Ting-Ting eyed the two men. One man, bald and fat, the man who appeared to be the boss, smiled unpleasantly. The other, younger and with more refined features, looked away.

– Why did you tell your boy to take my dog?

– We didn't, said Laoban, still smiling. He wanted a pet. He does things sometimes. You have to excuse Nephew Lin, he's a bit . . .

Laoban made a crude gesture with his fingers, in plain sight of the boy.

– He wanted a pet? wondered Ting-Ting. But that's not –

– They wanted to eat him, said Jessie, flatly.

Laoban's eyes widened in false surprise. Zhang looked away.

– You wanted to eat Tangyuan? That's disgusting! exclaimed Ting-Ting, screwing up her nose.

– A ridiculous assertion! said Laoban.

– They wanted to eat him, repeated Jessie. Look, they have that upside-down rice bowl by the counter. It says "fragrant meat" on it.

– That’s disgusting! said Ting-Ting.

– Don’t you know it’s going to be illegal? asked Jessie.

Laoban was silenced momentarily. Zhang adopted a detached expression and began to speak.

– The aversion to eating dog meat is purely cultural. It’s actually quite nutritious and healthful. It’s probably more healthful than pork. It has a long and diverse history. For example, the Aztecs ate dogs, and bred and traded them for meat. That’s the reason the Chihuahua has such short hair. The Romans, equally–

– But we’re not Romans or Aztecs, interrupted Ting-Ting. Only backwards country people eat dogs these days.

– But what I’m trying to say is: one man’s dog is another man’s pork.

– No, the difference is: your pork is my dog!

– And it’s going to be banned by the legislature, added Jessie, for emphasis.

– But food is food, continued Zhang. If you’re going to eat a cow or a chicken, why not a dog? It’s not a question of intelligence. We shouldn’t eat the apes or dolphins, I agree. But a dog is about as intelligent as a pig.

– You’re right, it has nothing to do with intelligence, said Ting-Ting. It has to do with people. We decide what we can and cannot eat, just as we decide what’s right and wrong. You can call it cultural or whatever you want, but it has a good reason: people love dogs. Sometimes they love them more than people. And if you eat a dog, you are eating someone that someone else loves, or could love, and that’s what’s disgusting about it. Imagine if I ate your nephew over there.

– He’s not my nephew.

– I don’t care. The point is, you are showing no respect for other people’s feelings. What you are doing is antisocial. In fact, it’s worse than that: what you are doing, she said, pointing at Zhang, is *animal*.

Ting-Ting stroked Tangyuan between the ears and turned around to leave. She ducked under the door and

out into the street, followed by Jessie.

– Stupid girls! said Laoban, once they had left.

Zhang stared at the half-raised door rather sadly.