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Culture, Reform Politics, and Future Directions: A Review of China's Animal Protection Challenge

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Incidents of animal abuse in China attract worldwide media attention. Is China culturally inclined to animal cruelty, or is the country's development strategy a better explanation? This article addresses the subject of animal protection in China, a topic that has been ignored for too long by Western China specialists. A review of ancient Chinese thought asks whether China lacks a legacy of compassion for animals. The article then considers how China's reform politics underlie the animal welfare crisis. Through its discussion of the welfare crisis impacting nonhuman animals in China, this paper sheds light on the enormity of the country's animal protection challenge. It concludes with an optimistic prediction for the future, despite the obstacles that remain in the way of animal protection policy change.

Introduction

On April 18, 2011, a French news agency (AFP) report shocked worldwide animal lovers (AFP, 2011a). More than 400 dogs crammed into a four-deck, long-distance truck were intercepted by activists in Beijing. The dogs—hungry, exhausted, sick, and dying—were being transported to northeast China's dog market to be sold for food. Not surprisingly, many of the rescued dogs wore collars suggesting their prior status as companion animals. What angered the public was the condition in which the dogs were transported. More than 200 of them were seriously ill. Many had open wounds. One dog delivered puppies on the way. Water was denied to the dogs on the entire journey of more than 1,000 miles. One dog was reportedly so thirsty that s/he finished drinking half a basin of water in a matter of seconds. Incidents like this are likely to create negative views of China with regard to human-animal relations.

The world was also shocked when China announced advances in bear farming technologies—a patently cruel practice of bile extraction from incarcerated live bears. Poor zoo conditions, abuse of animal actors in movie production, animal performance, and mass dog culls have all contributed to outside perceptions

of China as an unfriendly place for animals. Consumption of wildlife, use of endangered animal parts in traditional medicine, fur-animal farming, and massive tiger breeding have also been the subject of worldwide concern.

What explains the massive exploitation of animals in China? We first discuss the number and diversity of animals in China. This discussion will serve to illustrate the sheer magnitude of China's animal welfare challenge. What follows is an examination of the Chinese cultural outlook on human-animal relations, which attempts to determine whether China has a legacy of compassion for nonhuman animals. Since large animal-use industries never existed in China's past, we also ask whether China's reform politics have been directly responsible for animal welfare problems in the contemporary era. Finally, we ask how the reform program has in turn given rise to changes that will impact animals in the long run.

Animals in China: Numerical Superiority

China has a wide array of ecosystems and habitats. Not only is China the world's most populous nation, it is also the country with what may be the biggest nonhuman animal population. Size matters. The magnitude of the nonhuman population suggests an enormous challenge to China in the area of animal protection.

Farm Animals

China overtook the United States in 1990 as the world's biggest livestock producer. Meat production is indicative of the effectiveness of the Chinese authorities' food security strategy, which was implemented in the early 1980s. In 2005, China produced 29.26% of the world's meat products (CAAA, 2006). As a result, China's per capita meat output of 56 kilograms in 2005 contrasted impressively with that of India (5.6 kilograms), Mexico (48.2 kilograms), and Russia (36.1 kilograms). China's leading position in livestock production has been made possible by its farming the largest number of farm animals in the world. In 2005, China slaughtered 489 million pigs—51% of the pigs slaughtered in the world that year. Other farm animal species have also experienced a breathtaking increase in numbers. In 1962 China slaughtered 7 billion chickens, ducks, and geese. In 2005 that number jumped to 52 billion.

The sheer number of farm animals alone is no proof of poor animal welfare. Modes of production, methods of transportation, and slaughter techniques are better indicators. China's livestock production industries began the process of modernization or Westernization in the mid-1980s. The Western factory farming model was identified as the means for increasing productivity (Li, 2009). Foreign high-yielding and fast-growing breeding stocks were imported. Industrialized animal feed, feed additives (legal or illegal), and veterinary supplies became thriving businesses. China's passion for the factory-farming model is such that ethically questionable practices such as tail-docking, beak-trimming, forced feeding, early weaning, and the use of gestation crates and battery cages are found on farms in some of the most remote and inaccessible places in inland China (HSI & CIWF, 2006).

How many farm animals are raised on industrialized farms that compromise welfare? It is impossible to determine the exact number of China's factory farms. Yet, the share of industrialized farms in the nation's total livestock production is indicative of the prominence of farm animals in the modern system. Even though peasant household farms still comprise 94.48% of all pig farms, they only produce 53.06% of the pork output. Similarly, 4.29% of the intensive hen farms produce a disproportionate 73.27% of eggs in China (CAAA, 2003). In broiler production, 3.69% of factory farms contribute 83.14% of broiler output (Li, 2009). Although intensive farms are still small in number compared with peasant household farms, they produce disproportionately more animals. The intensive layer farms (4.29% of the total number of farms)

were able to produce 73.27% of the eggs in China because they employed technologies such as battery cages (Liu, 2003).

Concentration of farming operations in different regions of China is a new development. For example, pig farming has been moving to provinces in central and southwestern parts of the country while broiler and layer farming is concentrating in the grain-producing north and northeast China. This concentration of livestock farming has triggered nationwide long-distance live transport, particularly since in China there are four massive urban centers—the Hong Kong-Guangzhou region, the Beijing-Tianjin area, Shanghai, and Chongqing municipality. Inner Mongolian cattle bound for Hong Kong in South China travel up to 2,000 kilometers in special cargo trains. Live transport can be a huge welfare problem that impacts farm animals (Appleyby, Cussen, Garcés, Lambert, & Turner, 2008).

Wildlife and Wildlife Use

China is a country rich in biodiversity, with high numbers of endemic species. It has more than 6,347 species of vertebrates—14% of the world's total (China Biodiversity Office, 2006). China is famous for giant pandas, but there are other species unique to the country such as the South China tiger, the golden-haired monkey, the Chinese river dolphin, the white-lipped deer, and the Chinese alligator, to name the most endangered. China also plays an important role in global ecological balance as a home for migratory birds. As in most other countries, wildlife in China faces a serious survival challenge. According to the latest official Chinese statistics, 44% of the species of wildlife in the country is endangered (Yao, 2011). In China's reform era, increased human activities in general and profit-seeking activities in particular have accentuated human impact on nature and specifically on wildlife.

Wildlife Farming

China has a long history of wildlife domestication. According to zoo-archaeological findings, China's domestication of pigs, dogs, and cattle can be dated back between 7,000 and 8,000 years (Yuan, 2012). Chinese domestication of honey bees, silk worms, and other species for medicinal use are well-known accomplishments. Starting in the mid-1950s, special farming operations were created to domesticate wildlife species for medicinal and other purposes. By the end of the pre-reform era, some 3,000 breeding farms had been built raising mostly fur animals. Of these 3,000 farms, 100 were deer farms holding 400,000 animals. State monopoly, poor management, lack of consideration of the natural habits of the farmed animals, and saturation of domestic markets all contributed to the shrinkage of the industry. Despite state sponsorship, the number of farmed wild animals in the pre-reform era was small (Ma, 1992). China's massive wildlife farming industries have developed during the reform era. The number of farmed wild animal species reached 54 by the turn of the century (State Forestry Bureau, 2003). Wildlife farming is no longer a state-monopolized sector. Private farming operations have mushroomed. Today wildlife farming is a huge business operation.

Welfare problems on the wildlife farms have received extensive media coverage. In 1993 media reports exposed the shocking cruelty of China's bear farming. In 2003, in the wake of the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), the use of farmed wild animals for food received much attention. Civet cats, who were on the menu in South China and were the suspected carrier of the SARS virus, were massively farmed on some 60,000 farms, reportedly in shocking conditions. Veterinarian reports on bear farming documented severe welfare problems associated with this farming operation (Loeffler, I. K., Robinson, J., & Cochrane, G., 2009). Bear farming utilizes some shocking practices for achieving maximum profit and reducing mortality. For example, bears are intentionally denied adequate and proper foods for obtaining maximum bile extraction (Li, 2004).

Conditions on tiger farms are equally shocking. Tigers live in a vast terrain in the wild. Yet on the tiger farms, tigers typically live in individual houses with limited space for pacing. The tiger farm in Guilin is a tourist attraction, and tiger performances and live feeding are conducted there (Telecky & Li, 2008; IFAW, 2007). Welfare problems on Chinese fur farms electrified the international community when a report titled *Fun Fur? A Report on the Chinese Fur Industry* (Hsieh, Yi, Yu, Rissi, & Maas, 2005) was released. The report documented crowded cages, frantic stereotypic behaviors, brutal slaughter, and live skinning.

Wildlife Trade

Chinese wildlife markets perpetuate Southeast Asia's illegal wildlife trade. For example, Li and Li's (1998) survey along the Guangxi border between China and Vietnam revealed that as many as 2.3-29.3 tons of wildlife were illegally imported daily. Trade in turtles, lizards, and snakes comprised the greatest volume. Observations at other borders have produced similar findings (e.g., Wang, Wu, & Chen, 2001; Yang, Chen, Bai, Deng, & Liu, 2000).

The source countries in the wildlife trade are not confined to China's neighboring regions. Lee, Lau and Chang's (2004) survey in four markets in South China discovered 39 species of mammals, 435 species of birds, 54 species of reptiles, and 31 species of amphibians, many of which were legally protected species from the Middle East and Africa. In 2006 Hong Kong customs seized the biggest shipment of smuggled ivory from West Africa that it had ever intercepted. The 605 tusks seized weighed 3.9 tons and were en route to an unidentified destination in mainland China (Jiang, 2006). North America is also a source region of wildlife for the Chinese market.

Seal oil is the main product craved by Chinese traders. Since 2011, Canada has started an aggressive marketing campaign in an effort to open Chinese markets to seal meat. China's import of seal meat, seal oil, and seal fur could help sustain the highly controversial hunting operation in Canada (AFP, 2011b). In addition, freshwater turtles from the southern United States have recently been shipped to China in great numbers; between 2002 and 2006 some 250,000 Texas turtles were reportedly shipped via a Dallas airport to Asia for human consumption (Vaughn, 2007).

Animal welfare is an enormous problem in wildlife trade. The methods used to trap wild animals cause injury and mortality. Transported animals are crowded in containers with poor ventilation. The mortality rate in transport is high—sometimes greater than 50% (Li & Li, 1998). The destinations of wild animals in the wildlife trade—the wildlife markets—have also been criticized for appalling welfare conditions (Lee, Lau, & Chan, 2004). Poor welfare conditions also compromise human health. Animals from the markets have tested positive for a wide range of pathogens such as *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, etc. (Li & Li, 1998). It is little wonder that Chinese live animal markets were implicated in the 2002 outbreak of SARS (Bell, Robertson, & Hunter, 2004).

Animals in Entertainment

China has more than 700 captive wildlife institutions. Most are not members of the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens (CAZG) and are outside any government regulation. A majority of the private zoos were opened in the late 1990s. Visitors to the zoos of most urban centers are generally impressed with their animal collections. Beijing Zoo, China's flagship captive display institution, boasts 500 species and more than 5,000 animals (Wu, 2006). Nanjing's Hongshan Forest Zoo, opened in 1998, displays more than 200 species and over 3,000 animals. Modern aquariums are relatively new in China, yet the ten major ocean parks in the country can match any such institutions in the world with regard to animal collections and equipment.

Chinese zoos have much to do to become modern institutions. Personal observations by the authors at numerous zoos in China, including those in major cities, reveal an urgent need for improvement. Outdated, small, and barren enclosures with little or no naturalistic furnishings are commonplace, posing a serious animal welfare problem. The management of many zoos seems to neglect the connections between an enriched environment and healthier animals (Davey, Henzi, & Higgins, 2005). Live feeding, animal performance, and unruly visitor behaviors are other problems undermining the welfare of zoo animals (Davey et al., 2005; RSPCA, 1999). Chinese authorities have acknowledged zoo management and welfare problems. In 2010 CAZG held two conferences calling on its members to improve management, enrich the holding environment, and promote wildlife conservation. Zoo animal abuse was such that China's Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Development (MHURD) issued a directive in October 2010 to ban animal performances in zoos (Du, 2010).

Companion Animals

Condemned in the Mao era as part of an undesirable "bourgeois lifestyle" and banned in urban China until 1992, the keeping of companion animals represents a new development. According to an unofficial estimate, there are about 130 million dogs in China—1 dog per 10 people. Most of these are free-roaming dogs in rural areas, while urban companion dogs account for about one-third of the total. Because of official disincentives in the form of high registration fees, the forbidding of dogs in public places, and restrictions imposed on certain breeds of dogs as companion animals, registration rates are low. There are therefore a large number of "illegal" dogs in urban areas. In rural areas, most household dogs are not vaccinated. Welfare problems with dogs range from government-orchestrated dog culls to neglect and abandonment. Urban renovation results in dog abandonment across the country.

Cats are another popular companion animal, and in every Chinese city there are a large number of stray cats roaming the back alleys, public parks, abandoned factories, and residential areas. Beijing has about 200,000 stray cats, according to the Capital Animal Welfare Association (CAWA, 2007). Like dogs, household and stray cats are targeted by dog/cat thieves who trap these free-roaming animals and sell them to restaurants in South China. Across the country, it is estimated that more than four million cats are slaughtered for food each year (Animals Asia Foundation, 2012).

What explains the animal welfare crisis? Does China have a cultural legacy of animal cruelty? The sections that follow seek answers to these questions.

Human-Animal Relations in Chinese Culture

The writings of ancient Chinese philosophers reveal that animals played a significant societal role. Examples include the representation of animals in arts, music, and mythology. Zodiac animal signs were proposed by ancient astronomers (Song, 2004; Kisling, 2000; Schafer, 1968). Recognition of animals' value for enriching human lives is only one part of Chinese culture. Chinese tradition also contains ideas and practices that call for human compassion for animals.

Daoism (Taoism)

Daoism, or Daojiao, is a native system of philosophical ideas that later evolved to become a Chinese folk religion (Schipper & Verellen, 2004; Waley, 1934; Balfour, 1884). As a thought system, it prescribes the "right way" for humans to deal with one another, the cosmos, and fate. Daoism focuses on nature, the place of humans in nature, human-cosmos interdependence, and other subjects such as longevity, *wu wei* (freedom from desires and wants), immortality, and spontaneity. Daoist teachings have for more than 2,000 years shaped almost all aspects of Chinese culture.

The so-called three treasures of Daoist thought—i.e., compassion, frugality, and modesty—are particularly relevant here. *Compassion* is extended to nonhuman lives. In “Horses’ Hoofs,” in the second section of the Daoist book the *Zhuangzi*, the author, Zhuangzhou, expresses revulsion at the control of horses by trainers (e.g., through marking, hair-clipping, hoof-paring, bridling, confinement in stables, denial of food and water, galloping, etc.). How can horses not die en masse when they face “the evils of the bit and ornamented breastbands,” followed by “the terrors of the whip and switch”? asked Zhuangzhou (Zhuang, 1990, pp. 150-152). In another chapter, the “Floods of Autumn,” Zhuangzhou describes his horror at the nose-piercing of oxen and horses. He admonishes: “Do not by the human doing extinguish the heavenly constitution; do not for your human purpose extinguish the appointment of heaven; do not bury your proper fame in such a pursuit of it” (Zhuang, 1990, p. 290).

Daoism’s compassion for animals is based on its designation of nonhuman animals as an equal member of the vast cosmos. Humans are not superior to other animals, mountains, rivers, etc. Laozi rejected the claim that humans were more intelligent. Daoists saw all lives as being entirely equal (Zhang, 2006). Daoism is thus opposed to anthropocentrism (Mang, 2009). In Chapter 25 of *Dao De Jing*, the main Daoist text, humans are advised to learn from nonhuman animals (Zhang, 2006). Daoism envisions a society of species equality and interspecies harmony. It condemns manipulative relations between humans and nature. This position is emphasized in the “Normal Course for Rulers and Kings” in *Zhuangzi*, which states that efforts to transform nature for human benefit could be disastrous (Zhuang, 1990). Besides, Daoist ideas of frugality and moderation discourage extravagance and aggressiveness, two human traits that can result in damage to nature.

Daoism, in the form of the Daoist classics, was incomprehensible to the general public (Kohn, 2000), however, and it was folk Daoism that impacted people’s outlook most. Karma and ethics of behavior constitute two important pillars of folk Daoism. To be protected by the gods and obtain happiness, believers are expected to act morally. Acting morally means refraining from killing, excessive wants, and other undesirable expectations. Folk Daoism encourages prudent use of the natural world (Chen & Xie, 2004). Texts espousing folk Daoism devote much space to recommended behaviors such as exercising kindness, mercy, and compassion. The *Treaties of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* offers the following for the mass of believers:

Do not proceed on an evil path.

Accumulate virtue, increase merit.

With a compassionate heart turn toward *all creatures* [italics added].

Take pity on orphans, assist widows; respect the old, be kind to children.

Even the multifarious *insects, herbs, and trees* [italics added] should not be injured.

Assist those in need, and rescue those in danger. (Suzuki & Carus, 1906, pp. 3-4)

Daoism makes China one of the first nations advocating interspecies equality. *The World of the Interrelated Self and Other* is a recently published work on ancient Chinese thoughts about human-animal relations by mainland Chinese scholars. In this book, contemporary readers are introduced to Daoist animal welfare ideas and Daoist admonitions against using animals as playthings and killing animals for medicine (Mang, 2009). Daoism does not sanction human behavior that costs the lives or well-being of nonhuman animals.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ancient philosophical system derived from the teachings of Confucius (Kong Fuzi, 551 BCE–479 BCE), his key disciples and advocates (Mencius, in the fourth century BCE; Xunzi, in the third century BCE; and Dong Zhongshu, in the second century BCE). Confucianism was official orthodoxy that

shaped institutions, attitudes, and behaviors for more than 2,000 years. The representative works of Confucius are the *Analects*, a recollection of his ideas compiled by his disciples and students. There are also three other seminal works: *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Works of Mencius*. These collections form the foundation of a large body of literature that embellishes Confucian principles.

Confucianism is unapologetically anthropocentric, putting humans at the center, with greater intrinsic value than other species. The Confucian concept of benevolence, for example, was traditionally interpreted as “love of men.” Xun Zi, a proponent of Confucianism, held that humans were the most precious of all living creatures. Dong Zhongshu, a Han Confucian scholar, argued that humans were at the top of all creatures and that nonanimals existed for humans (Zhang, 2006). Confucian scholars in later dynasties, however, proposed that benevolence or love should be extended beyond the human race (Mang, 2009).

Mencius was the first Confucian scholar who ventured into the subject of human compassion for animals. His view of compassion for animals was, in the opinion of Chinese scholars, meant to illustrate the point that compassion was a much-needed quality for rulers (Mang, 2009). Mencius was also believed to have ideas about animal conservation. Although to Confucianists there is nothing wrong in humans using nature as long as it is in the interests of a benevolent government, a harmonious society, and cordial family relations, Mencius warned that preparations for scarcity must be made in times of abundance. He denounced excessive use of forests and fish. His concern was less about the lives of animals and more about the need to conserve for greater and more sustainable human use (Zhang, 2006).

As an important part of Confucianism, the Doctrine of the Golden Mean calls for moderation and restraint. It cautions against extremism, excesses, and self-centeredness. The doctrine has served to neutralize the impact of the anthropocentric Confucian outlook on the general public. In ancient China, for example, the idea of moderation was translated into state laws against the excessive use of nature, so it led to certain ecological protections. For instance, during the Han dynasty (63 BCE), the imperial government issued China’s first bird protection law, which prohibited killing birds and harvesting eggs during spring and summer (Sun, He, & Huang, 2009). Kings believed that indiscriminate killing of birds and destruction of bird nests would bring bad luck and legitimacy crises. Despite its anthropocentric outlook, then, Confucianism does take a stand against excessive exploitation of nature.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India around the sixth century BCE as a result of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (“Buddha” or “the Enlightened One”). In the first to fourth centuries CE it was introduced to China, where it gradually developed into an established movement. The main focus of Buddhism is personal spiritual development and attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. It emphasizes the equality of all living creatures. The Buddhist idea of karma posits that killing animals would invite misfortune in the afterlife—a warning against brutality to nonhuman creatures. Buddhism did not necessarily teach the Chinese to befriend animals, but it did claim that killing was an inhumane act (Lin, 1966). Buddhism influenced many of China’s great literary thinkers. Bai Juyi, a Tang dynasty poet, wrote: “Do not shoot birds in early spring. The new-born are awaiting the safe return of the mother bird” (Mang, 2009, p. 106).

Mercy release—a Buddhist practice of setting free captured animals as a way of evoking human compassion for animals—was a common practice in the Sui (581-618 CE), Tang (618-907 CE), Ming (1368-1466 CE), and Qing (1466-1911 CE) dynasties. Special pavilions, release ponds, and societies were established across the country for mercy release. In the Ming Dynasty, Lian Chi, a famous Buddhist

master, wrote the *Text of Prohibition of Killing and Mercy Release*. His message of compassion for nonhuman lives has been influential in China (Lian Chi, 2011).

Prohibition of killing and mercy release were in fact state policies. The authorities and the public believed that killing animals at times of celebration ruined the festival atmosphere. Celebrations should be times to accumulate virtue, not to produce sorrow. Therefore animal killing was forbidden during major ceremonies or birthdays, or when a natural disaster struck (Mang, 2009). This tradition was continued even in modern times. In 1933, when Wuhan was struck by a major flood, the city government forbade butchery for three days. Animal killing was also suspended during drought or famine in other areas of the country (Lin, 1966).

Vegetarian diet is another practice espoused by Buddhism. Not only did Buddhist followers adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, but believers of Nestorianism, a branch of Christianity, did so as well. After Manicheanism was introduced from the Middle East in 694 CE, years of interaction with Buddhist ideas turned it into a staunch supporter of vegetarianism (Mang, 2009).

The foregoing review of China's three main thought systems suggests that the country is not culturally inclined to animal cruelty. Daoism stands for the idea of species equality. Confucianism advocates moderation and restraint, though it does propagate an anthropocentric world outlook. Buddhism condemns killing and calls for mercy toward animals. The many reported cases of animal cruelty in contemporary China run counter to Chinese cultural tradition. The nature of modern-day politics, especially government and corporate behavior, motivated by the need for economic growth, may better explain many of the conflicts between people and other animals.

Reform Politics and the Animal Protection Challenge

Three decades ago China was one of the poorest nations on earth. The economy was on the brink of collapse. The country's 900 million people were not only politically disenfranchised but economically deprived. When the Maoist era came to an end, the Chinese Communist authorities vowed to change the nation's economic situation. Like other states embracing a capital-driven economy, China today, in the reform era, is obsessed with growth in order to end economic backwardness, defuse the legitimacy crisis, and eliminate external security threats (Bolesta, 2007; Gerschenkron, 1962). Growth is the top priority for the post-Mao leadership.

The "Development First" Mind-Set

In the words of Deng Xiaoping, architect of the reform program, the aim of reform is to liberate productivity. To local officials, economic reform means fast GDP growth. Obsession with growth has been blamed for a host of ethically questionable business and investment decisions (Economy, 2005a). To local authorities, the ultimate criterion judging their performance is growth rate and revenue contribution. Environmental protections (animal welfare is a concept unfamiliar to most Chinese officials) are regarded as future objectives that, for the time being, can take a backseat.

Political and Legal Obstacles

China's authoritarian state makes animal protection activities difficult, if not impossible. Bruce Cumings (1999) calls East Asian developmental states "bureaucratic-authoritarian industrializing regimes" (p. 90) because of their suspicion and strict laws against autonomous activities. Criticism in China of government policies is silenced, and challenges to state-led capitalist development are often suppressed with force. The need to fight poverty, sustain growth, catch up with advanced economies, and curb sources of social instability is often used as a justification for limiting civil liberties. A good example in China is the

government's suspicion of unofficial advocacy groups. The authorities have revised NGO policies to marginalize different social voices through strict registration rules, financial requirements, and official supervision of activities (Yan, 2007).

China's animal protection movement is not supported by the nation's legal system (Chang, Michaels, Littlefair, & Li, 2010). Reform era legislative activism has mostly served to create a favorable legal climate for economic development (Ngok, 2002). Regulations and rules related to animal protection are scattered throughout different laws and policies. China does not have a general animal welfare law. An important milestone was the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Law in 1988. Yet the aim of the law is to regulate sustainable use of wildlife resources, and, moreover, violations of the law are widespread (Li, 2007).

Most other rules and regulations related to animals have also experienced enforcement problems. The Regulations for the Administration of Affairs Concerning Experimental Animals (1988) cover provisions pertaining to suitable housing, feeding and breeding facilities, employment of qualified staff, use of certified animal breeds and strains, use of safe and reliable transport methods, and penalties for violation of the regulations (Davey & Wu, 2007). But there is no way to confirm that these regulations have been observed. The 1997 Ministry of Forestry's "Tentative Regulation on the Use and Management of Black Bear Farming Technology," adopted to protect the bear farming industry and improve farm conditions, has been violated by most, if not all, bear farms.

There are several factors contributing to the failure of law enforcement. These include the lack of an overarching animal welfare law, the fact that not all wildlife has state protection, the generality of the laws, the great discretionary power in interpreting laws that is given to local authorities, and the utilization orientation of law making (Li, 2007).

A Clash of Ideas

Animal protection has become a subject of academic discussion only in the reform era. Yang Jingtong, a philosopher at the Academy of Social Sciences (ASS), China's official think tank, was one of the first to introduce Western animal rights and welfare ideas into Chinese academia (Yang, 1993). Qiu Renzong, a senior philosopher at ASS, published a seminal article in 2002 calling for attention to the nation's animals. He argued that China was philosophically and materially ready for a policy breakthrough in animal protection. Three questions divide academics on the need for a policy change in favor of animal protection. The first asks whether animal welfare is an appropriate topic for discussion in China. The second inquires whether China is ready for animal welfare legislation. And the third wonders whether an animal welfare crisis really exists (Li, 2006).

To supporters, animal welfare should be placed on the state's legislative agenda. They see China at a historical crossroads for animal protection. They believe that anticruelty should be on the legislative agenda. Some have recently been involved in proposing a prototype animal welfare law (Sun, He, & Liang, 2009). To them, animal abuse is not only real but is preventing China from becoming a truly modern society. The opposing camp has different answers to the questions. They view claims of an animal welfare crisis as fabrications. Some even argue that animals in China are treated fairly and that welfare legislation is unnecessary. Others do not deny the need for policy change but believe that China can wait until conditions are ripe, in the distant future. Some opponents even claim that animal welfare is a tool of the West, used to stifle China's rising power by, for example, blocking the entry of Chinese products into Western markets (Turner & D'Silva, 2006).¹

Light at the End of the Tunnel

There are significant obstacles to policy change in favor of animal protection in China. Yet Chinese activists see hope on the horizon. Reasons to be cautiously optimistic include the changing attitudes and growing affluence of Chinese society, increasing activism, the cautious opening of Chinese politics, and unprecedented media attention.

Changing Attitudes

Despite obstacles to policy change, surveys have reported widespread public concern for animal welfare across a broad spectrum of issues, including hunting, wildlife farming, the eating of wildlife, keeping captive animals in zoos, etc. The majority of respondents to public surveys have expressed concern with how animals are treated. They support efforts to eliminate animal suffering. They believe that animal welfare deserves consideration. And they support animal protection and welfare organizations (Davey, 2007; Davey, 2006a; Davey, 2006b; MORI, 2005; Zu, Li, & Su, 2005). Furthermore, the Chinese public has responded disapprovingly to high-profile cruelty cases (Zu et al., 2005). Rising consciousness of animal welfare is also indicated by other developments. The increasing popularity of vegetarianism and organic food—though proponents are still low in absolute numbers—can be explained to some extent by concerns regarding animal suffering. Buddhist mercy release has come back in recent years with the increasing popularity of Buddhism among a growing number of urbanites.

Cautious Openness

Chinese government is evolving. In 1993 China's Forestry Ministry officials sat down with domestic and international activists to discuss the welfare problems of bear farming. The meeting resulted in the closure of two bear farms with the most shocking conditions. In 2003, Guangdong's provincial legislature held a public hearing on the fate of wildlife trade in the province. This was possibly the first time a Chinese local government had ever opened the policymaking process to the public. Since then, many local governments have published draft policies for public consultation. In October 2010 the Chinese authorities issued a ban on zoo animal performance, largely in response to worldwide concern over the welfare of the nation's zoo animals.

Government openness is also reflected in other areas. In 2007 the Ministry of Justice included animal protection as a research subject to be covered by a special grant. The annual meeting of the National People's Congress has recently become the occasion for submitting animal protection proposals. Also as a result of public criticism, in 2004 and 2005 the State Forestry Bureau was enlisted to conduct a review of the Wildlife Protection Law for the purposes of revision. Nanjing's dog registration policy, adopted in 2007, was the work of the municipal legislative council, the public security bureau, and local NGOs. Government spending on urban animal management is a most encouraging sign. Beginning in 2007, the Beijing municipal government spearheaded the nation's first government-sponsored trap-neuter-release program, a one-million-Yuan initiative to sterilize the city's stray animals.²

An Evolving Animal Protection Movement

China has experienced a rapid rise in the number of advocacy groups since the early 1990s. According to a 2006 Civil Affairs Ministry Report, China had more than 354,000 NGOs by the end of 2005 (Song, 2007). There were about 40,000 environmental protection NGOs. The first animal protection group, the Small Animal Protection Association of China (SAPAC), was created in 1992 and was subsequently registered with the Civil Affairs Ministry (the government agency regulating NGOs) (Mang, 2009).

Pushing for public policy change is a main effort of the animal protection NGOs. Public education is another major activity. Actions against cruelty have produced some impressive results. Activists converged in front of the Beijing Zoo in November 2006 and protested the city's outdated dog registration policy. In November of 2008, they intercepted shipments of thousands of cats bound for Guangdong's markets. An activist even took the cat traffickers to court in Shanghai. Most recently, Chinese NGOs launched campaigns against Canadian attempts to sell seal products to Chinese consumers. They have also filed protests against an American plan to introduce rodeos to China.

International NGOs

Since the late 1970s, more than 6,000 international NGOs have reportedly entered China. Most specialize in poverty reduction, education, and public health. International conservation organizations were among the first to set foot in China. In 1979 and 1980 the International Crane Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) began operations in China. In recent years, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the Animal Asia Foundation (AAF), World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), Humane Society International (HSI), and others have increased their activities in China. These international NGOs brought in progressive ideas. They have also brought millions of dollars for a wide range of cooperative projects. Animals Asia Foundation built Asia's biggest bear sanctuary in Chengdu. The World Society for the Protection of Animals pioneered a humane slaughter project. Humane Society International has launched a collaborative relationship with China's official Zoological Garden Association for improving Chinese zoo management and welfare standards.

Environmental NGOs have long been known to push the boundaries in socialist states (Economy, 2005b). In China, the authorities have struggled to trust and deal with them, suspecting that their activities were a means of collecting intelligence on sensitive information related to social, ethnic, religious, and ecological matters (Guo, 2007). The government's biggest fear is that international NGOs would ultimately threaten political stability by encouraging activism on the part of Chinese groups and the public. The many restrictions placed on foreign NGOs are indicative of the government's mistrust and fear.

Media Coverage

The Chinese media have never been so vigorous. Media coverage of animal cruelty was unheard of in the pre-reform era. Now, cases of animal abuse inundate all types of media. Reporters have ventured into the "no man's zone" of the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau to cover volunteers' efforts to save Tibetan antelopes. They entered bear farms to document the cruel practice of bile extraction; and they followed wildlife traffickers into the forests to report on the illegal trade of endangered species. Their reports set in motion media activism on subjects traditionally ignored in the past.

New media such as the Internet have been utilized by the nation's activists who are young and computer savvy. When animal cruelty incidents occur, activists spread the information through Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. When the state-controlled traditional media kept silent on the dog cull in Shaanxi, local animal lovers used the Internet to call to the outside world for help. In December 2008 activists in Guangzhou coordinated protests through the Internet when they were tipped off about a shipment of cats that had arrived by train. In mid-April 2011, a young man who spotted a truckload of dogs on the highway in Beijing twittered activists in the city and succeeded in drawing more than 300 activists to a highway interception of the dogs bound for the dog-meat market. There is little doubt that media will continue to play an important role in China's animal protection movement.

Conclusions

Animal protection is a controversial topic in China. The sheer size of the animal population is indicative of the enormity of the animal welfare challenge in the country. Rapid economic and social change has produced new conflicts between people and animals and has posed new challenges to the authorities. These changes are set against the backdrop of a national drive for prosperity. Balancing the increasing societal demand for animal protection and the state's objective of economic growth is a difficult task. China's reform politics, rather than its cultural tradition, seem directly responsible for profit-seeking behaviors that often occur at the expense of animal welfare.

Despite the political, institutional, and legal obstacles to animal protection, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Thirty years of breathtaking economic growth has created a new generation that is the main force behind the expanding animal protection community. Changing public attitudes and the increasing activism of animal advocacy groups are impacting both Chinese society and the Chinese government. The Chinese authorities are cautiously beginning to listen to these societal voices. This trend is sure to continue. Different voices on the issue of animal protection will always exist. But policy change in favor of animal protection is not unlikely in view of the many policy measures that have been adopted and the decisions that have recently been made by the Chinese authorities.

Notes

¹ See, in particular, Peter J. Li's "The Evolving Animal Rights and Welfare Debate in China: Political and Social Impact Analysis," pp. 111-128.

² Author's meeting with officials from Beijing municipal government's agriculture department, May 11, 2009.

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