

# The Best “Chink” Food

## Dog Eating and the Dilemma of Diversity

*“People live too easy, that’s the trouble with the world,” he said. He wiped the bloody knife again and again on his apron. “They watch the stupid TV, they read the stupid Reader’s Digest and the stupid best sellers, they eat trucker tomatoes that got no taste and no color, no value in the world except they’re easy to ship, they go to work, go home again, just like cows to the milking—” He picked out another knife, a long one with a blade eight inches wide, raised it, and brought it down once very hard, WHUMP!—and the dog’s head fell off, blood splashing.... The dog’s head looked up at me with the tongue hanging out through the big, still teeth, an expression of absolute disbelief.... The horror was too solidly there to look away from.*

—John Gardner, “The Art of Living”

### Buster and Ding Ding

I love dogs. I live with two of them in a canine-centered household.

Buster is a ninety-five-pound mutt I adopted after he, as an unwanted Christmas gift, had been abandoned at a local pet shelter. He is named after the dog my wife’s cousin raised when he was director of the Peace Corps mission in Tonga years ago. The original Buster eventually vanished, allegedly eaten by the neighbors after he killed their pig. Our Buster has needed extra training to overcome his many anxieties. A deep-chested shepherd mix with gold fur and white paws, a white tip on his tail, and a scar on his nose from breaking through a second-story window, he is powerful but timid. He spends his days chewing on tennis balls and lounging on top of his crate. But at the first murmurings of thunder, he runs to the basement to hide.

Ding Ding is a twenty-five-pound stray I rescued when she was a puppy. She is named after the beach resort in Taiwan where I found her, wandering alone and scavenging for insects. At six months of age she was issued a doggie passport verifying that she had had all the requisite vaccinations, and I was able to tuck her into a basket under the airplane seat. Resembling an elegant cross between a basenji and sight hound, with a black-and-tan coat, long legs, and a doe-like face, Ding Ding is spoiled and fussy. She barks at strangers and likes to sleep in guests’ laps.

I subscribe to the school of thought summarized by the quip “The more I know of man, the better I like my dogs.” I am appalled by the idea that anybody would eat dogs. The question

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**Right:** Dog meat for sale at the weekly market in Yangzhou, China, December 2006. PHOTOGRAPH © CHARLIE GROSSO



of whether Asians, in particular, eat dogs also appalls me. How we as a society address the taboo on dog eating presents an excellent case study for contemplating the meanings and limits of diversity in all of its forms. Dog eating is neither as easy to accept as chopsticks instead of silverware, nor as easy to forbid as violence against women when justified as a venerable custom.

## Dilemmas of Diversity

It may be that the question “Do Asians eat dogs?” can best be answered by another question: “What do you think?” Why an individual asks the first question and how we as a society structure the discussion are important, but dialogue itself is only a process without an end—always tentative, never definitive. The dialogue must be self-reflective, and if successfully critical, it can serve as a model for approaching the dilemmas of diversity. These dilemmas are greater for the open-minded, who embrace all experience, than for the closed-minded, who eat only familiar foods without nausea. Cosmopolitan principles conflict with parochial practices, and as we discover that tolerance has its limits, we often take recourse in what intellectual rigor most loathes: ambivalence and ambiguity.

We only sample diversity. Our festivals of diversity tend toward the superficial, as if America were a stomach-turning combination plate of grits, tacos, sushi, and hummus. But we also know intuitively that “food permits a person to partake each day of the national past,” as philosopher Roland Barthes wrote, with the French expressly in mind.<sup>1</sup> For most Americans, dog eating is not even conceivable as a gustatory pleasure representative of the national past.

The most popular feature of the ethnic carnivals organized in city parks every summer is the long line of food booths giving off the intermingled aromas of their individual fare. Each of the family-owned restaurants renting a space competes energetically to sell a comestible introduction to the national culture its owners represent, giving the misleading impression that to eat is to understand. Nowadays, Asian flavors are foremost on the menus. Passersby can satisfy their appetites with Americanized versions—at once bland, cheap, and greasy—of *pho* soup, chicken satay, *bi bim bop*, samosas with chutney, shrimp and vegetable tempura, or fried dumplings with soy sauce. They can refresh themselves with iced coffee sweetened by condensed milk, or a mango *lassi* yogurt drink. They may even be able to find *sac sac* grape juice, green tea ice cream, or red beans on shaved ice.

It is unlikely, however, that any of the Asian entrepreneurs would dare to offer up a bite of dog stew, even though it would be authentic—it once could be found throughout China, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the Pacific Rim. Dog meat has been the subject of lurid stories from epicurean tourists ever since Captain Cook and his crew landed on what they referred to as the Sandwich Islands (which we now know as Hawaii). At the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, a multitude of necklaces consisting of innumerable pale yellow dog teeth strung together are still exhibited in glass cases alongside other artifacts of the former island glories. Yet even the editor of a volume called *The*

*Anthropologists' Cookbook* acknowledges that “there are limits, nevertheless, in matters of taste,” and “some readers may object” to the instructions for preparing roast dog in an earth oven.<sup>2</sup> On his global tour of the culinary world for cable television in 2001, host Anthony Bourdain refused to try dog meat, despite ingesting live cobra heart and boiled iguana.<sup>3</sup> At a luau, the slow-moving and reputedly dim-witted *poi* dogs, named after the taro root (*poi*) on which they were fattened until ready to be baked at two years of age, have long since ceased to be the main dish. In St. Louis, which once had an area named Dog Town due to sensationalized legends about Filipino visitors to the 1904 World's Fair, it is improbable that dogs would be grilled for guests today.

Asian cookbooks in English abound, but dog eating is not on the menu anywhere. There is no literary champion savoring *asosena* (“dog meat” in the Filipino dialect of Tagalog) as the specialty of a Manila street vendor, as M. F. K. Fisher would have savored a rustic repast of pâté, cheese, and a proper digestif at a Provençal inn, sharing her talent for giving readers a vicarious taste.<sup>4</sup>

An exception is the late novelist John Gardner, whose short story “The Art of Living” provides the epigraph to this chapter. In the title piece of his 1981 *Art of Living* collection, which exemplifies his moral fiction, Gardner portrays dog eating as a reverential ritual. A motorcycle gang steals a dog so a chef can prepare a banquet centered on Imperial Dog. The chef is paying homage to his son, who had written to him about eating dog before being killed in the Vietnam War. The story, illustrated with woodblock prints, ends with everyone beholding a vision “in the darkness beyond where the candles reached.” The lost son is surrounded by “a thousand thousand Asians bowed from the waist.”<sup>5</sup>

A more typical reference to dog eating is the warning given by a dying man to his dog, Mr. Bones, in novelist Paul Auster's *Timbuktu*: “You get yourself a new gig, or your days are numbered,” man's best friend is told, because “there's a Chinese restaurant on every block, and if you think mouths don't water when you come strolling by, then you don't know squat about Oriental cuisine.”<sup>6</sup>

Dog eating is an international urban legend with some truth to it. Everybody knows that Asians eat dogs. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson joked about it in his journals: “The Englishman in China, seeing a doubtful dish set before him, inquired, ‘quack-quack?’ The Chinese replied, ‘bow-wow.’”<sup>7</sup> The sheep's head hanging in the window of the Chinese shop is supposed to be a signal that the shopkeeper will sell dog meat to those privy to the secret. In *Strange Foods: Bush Meat, Bats, and Butterflies: An Epicurean Adventure Around the World*, explorer Jerry Hopkins states that the Chinese Kuomintang political party began their meetings by eating dog. Hopkins tried dog as a staple and treat as he wandered across Asia, finding in Thailand “a kind of Oriental dog tartare, where raw dog meat is chopped almost to a mince, mixed with a few spices and finely chopped vegetables, and served with the dog's blood and bile” and dog “deep-fried into a sort of jerky that was very hard to chew.” (In the same adventuresome spirit, he ate the placenta after the birth of his son.)<sup>8</sup>

Even in Asia, dog eating has become simultaneously a source of shame and pride. When the Olympic games were hosted by Seoul, Korea, in 1988, the government, in order to

enhance its image in the West, attempted vigorously to ban dog eating. Since then, during major sporting contests high officials have continued to make a show of opposition to the culinary custom. Boosted by vocal support from many of the visiting athletes, their efforts have met with no more than modest success. Prior to the 2002 soccer World Cup, the Korean government tried the compromise of formally legalizing dog eating while simultaneously regulating it. Recent studies have found that over one-third of adults in the country eat dog stew in a given year. Press reports on the controversy usually include quotes from Koreans who are indignant about the denigration of their way of life. They are not about to be lectured by foreigners with an air of superiority.

In the United States, the response to dog eating is more likely to be revulsion. In 1989, in Long Beach, California, Cambodian refugees bludgeoned to death a German shepherd puppy before slashing its throat and skinning it. The judge dismissed the misdemeanor indictment against them. He found that they had not inflicted unreasonable pain. Animal rights groups were outraged by the ruling. As one of their spokespersons stated, “I think that what these defendants did offends the sensibilities of the community.”<sup>9</sup> To ensure that the next prosecution was successful, the California legislature passed a statute making it a misdemeanor to eat dog or cat. They later amended the statute to encompass any animal ordinarily kept as a pet or companion. The only recently reported case in which a defendant was convicted of eating a dog concerned a man, apparently not Asian, who barbecued the ribs of his neighbor’s dog to avenge a perceived insult. In that 1992 California case, the unrepentant defendant received a sentence of three years.<sup>10</sup>

Performance artist Joey Skaggs, who stages elaborate pranks, fooled activists and the media alike with a 1994 stunt in which he mailed letters to animal shelters nationwide, offering to buy dogs for export as food at ten cents per pound. Masquerading as a Korean businessman, he sent letters from a non-existent company whose name, Kea So Joo, translates as Dog Meat Soup. “Dog is good food. Dog is good medicine,” his letter read. “Dog no suffer. We have quick death for dog.” Callers to his answering machine, which played a bilingual greeting with dogs yapping in the background, left thousands of messages denouncing the scheme before it was revealed as a hoax. Skaggs received messages calling him a “filthy yellow devil” and suggesting that Asians be deported or killed. He stated mischievously that he wanted to demonstrate the vagaries of cultural chauvinism.<sup>11</sup>

## “Do Asians Eat Dogs?”

Let us consider the range of potential reactions to the clichéd allegation that Asians eat dogs. When comedian Joan Rivers, hosting a television program before the 2000 Academy Awards, quipped before a commercial break that viewers could take their dogs for a walk, or if they were Filipino, eat them, protests by Filipino organizations goaded Rivers into subsequently delivering a halfhearted apology. (The following year Rivers remarked, “It’s wonderful to see so many Asians here. It just gives [the program] a whole international

flavor.”) The joke that makes the rounds nowadays substitutes the Hmong for the other Asian ethnicities that used to be the butt: “What’s the name of the Hmong cookbook? 101 *Ways to Wok Your Dog*.”<sup>12</sup> The Asian-American child who is taunted that the fastest animal on the street is her pet Rover, who must run awfully fast to avoid ending up in the dinner pot, probably does not realize either the complex implications of what is being said or the various options open to her in formulating a response.

How Filipino-American organizations, how the child, how each Asian-American responds to the stereotype ends up affecting all of us. To the mocking inquiry “Do Asians eat dogs?” no riposte, however sharp, can effectively convey that “I speak for myself alone.” The question is common enough to list with the others that define the sensation of being a perpetual foreigner, so familiar to Asian-Americans, however well they can pass themselves off on the phone as White, and even if they are startled to see in the mirror that they are not: “Where are you *really* from?” and “How do you like it in our country?” and “When are you going home?” Inevitably, even if these questions lead to the compliment “You speak English so well,” they also contain the subtext “If you don’t like it here, you can go back to where you came from.” And somehow, even if that racial dictate were obeyed, the cultural supremacy cannot be evaded: Even if we were to “go back,” we are no better off, for we are not to eat dogs there, either.

“Do Asians eat dogs?” must—but cannot—be countered.

The initial assimilationist answer to the charge is face-saving defiance: “*Asians don’t eat dogs*.” But ironically, a denial serves as an admission. Indeed, the angrier the answer, the more assimilated the answerer. To refute the claim that Asians eat dogs is to admit that it would be wicked to do so. To protest also allows people to speak of Asians as a whole, so that the protester is actually acquiescing to the general practice of stereotyping.

Novelist May-Lee Chai, a resident of Laramie, Wyoming, invoked this kind of protective stereotyping in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in 1994. She wrote to complain about a news item telling of dog eating in mainland China, calling it “false information” and recounting a tradition of keeping dogs as pets and honoring them in artwork as symbols of fidelity. She closed her letter with an anecdote that reversed the roles: “In my two years of working and traveling in China, the only people I saw eating dog there were a group of American students. The Americans, newly arrived in Nanjing, went about the city in search of a restaurant that served dog. They found none. Finally they persuaded a private entrepreneur to procure a dog (for a sizable fee) and found someone willing to cook it in a stew. When the time came for the ‘feast,’ a crowd of amazed Chinese gathered and snapped pictures as the Americans ate a German shepherd.”<sup>13</sup>

The subtler assimilationist answer may be more truthful, if no more satisfying: “*Other Asians might eat dogs, but I don’t; I don’t even condone it.*” Like the earlier disclaimer, this retort reflects the majority norm that devouring dogs is deviant behavior, but it draws a line between the group and the individual. In this manner, the respondent repudiates both the reputation and the culture. The hint that Asians are not all alike comes at the cost of disavowing other Asians, even the community of which the respondent is a part. She may

be sacrificing her family to cultivate a relationship with the majority, saying, in effect, “Bad Asians eat dogs; I am not like them.”

This is a plausible interpretation of the Korean government policy. The title of Jessica Hagedorn’s first novel, *Dogeaters*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1990 and adapted for Broadway a decade later, refers to the name the rich call the poor.<sup>14</sup> High culture distances itself from low culture. The dog-eating recidivist is the superstitious peasant, not the urbane sophisticate.

Asked “Do Asians eat dogs?” the multi-culturalist accepts the description but rejects the prescription: “*Asians eat dogs, and who are you to criticize them?*” This aggressive argument applies to a limited extent, but it falters at an emotional level. The subject is literally too visceral. The censure is a gut feeling.

Many Asians dine on delicacies that would disgust most Anglos, but as a consequence their supper becomes a spectacle. Raw fish has become enough of an upscale fashion that sushi aficionados can order the delectable belly tuna (*toro*) as easily as they can the plain tuna (*maguro*), just as the appetizer of seaweed salad is “in.” Tofu, ranging in texture from firm to silky, is a vegan staple, stocked at every supermarket in multiple brands. Bee pollen, ginseng, *kava*, and all sorts of herbs and medicinals have become domestic harvests lining the shelves at health-food stores. Edamame, boiled and salted fresh soybeans that are eaten with drinks, are beginning to rival beer nuts. Shrimp chips can be found alongside pork rinds. Calpis (say it aloud) and Pocari Sweat sport drinks are being imported, embarrassing names and all. On the other hand, eyes plucked out of a steamed fish head, stinky tofu, slimy sea cucumbers, bear paw, warm snake bile, congealed blood, wrinkled chicken feet, slimy giant water bugs, savory baked cocoons, bitter cow dung, and fried duck embryos have attracted no broader following than non-Asian ethnic dishes such as pigs’ feet. Because most of us were not exposed to these foods by our parents, they do not appear likely to follow the bagel into the gastronomic mainstream as comfort food.

It is too facile, though, to note that most dietary restrictions, even religious proscriptions, are socially constructed and historically contingent. Although their origins lie in sensible precautions to stave off food poisoning and infection in times before refrigeration and the germ theory, they have since developed into an elaborate set of customs that help shape identity. Eschewing beef or pork may once have been a sanitary concern, but it has become as much an ethical apprehension. Hindus who think of the cow as sacred or Jews who deem the pig filthy should be protected as minorities. But in a society where strictly observant Hindus or Jews are the majority, it would be imprudent to advocate for an increased intake of steaks or pork chops.

Nowadays, few Americans keep chickens in the backyard and wring their necks for dinner, and a diminishing number still shoot game for their family’s sustenance. Whether we shop for bulk discounts at the supermarket warehouse or graze on the latest organic concoction at the health-food chain store, we are largely phony gourmands without any conception of how our food reaches the table. The staunch individualist Henry David

Thoreau fantasized about eating a woodchuck raw while he lived in his cabin by Walden Pond. There was a brief moment—after the advent of the civil rights movement and before “White flight” cleared out the city’s core—when African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and White ethnics would shop together on weekends at downtown warehouses where “fresh” meant alive, and catfish swam in tanks next to display cases of organs and blood sausage, below a row of hooks from which hung almost every type of carcass fit for human consumption. But no more.

Another multi-culturalist answer proposes a philosophical attitude: “*I don’t eat dog, but if I did, what would be wrong with that?*” There is no great incentive for pressing this intellectual viewpoint. The individual who in fact does not eat dogs but who protects the right of others to do so must in turn persuade others to permit and respect practices they neither engage in nor approve of. But dogs are too much members of our household, especially as we Americans lavish our largesse on them, paying for cosmetic surgery to enhance their competitiveness in the show ring, hiring professional walkers to take them, ten at a time, for a stroll in the park, equipping them with designer trench coats and high-tech booties to protect their paws from snow and rain, buying them miniature sofas and cedar-chip-stuffed beds for their relaxation, giving them the same anti-depressants we swallow for self-help for their personality development, and feeding them super-premium kibble for their health. We are no more tempted to put them in the broiler than we would our own children. Most Americans are indisposed to permit dog eating in spite of the Latin maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum* (“There’s no arguing about taste”)—no matter that the great physician of antiquity, Hippocrates, reported that puppies could be eaten as a curative, and dog recipes were published in Paris as recently as 1870.

Even if we are convinced, as most are, that freedom of expression is laudable, few of us espouse an unconditional moral relativism. While we might acquiesce to the eating of dogs, that does not mean we would like to broaden our open-mindedness to human cannibalism. For that matter, we are unlikely to sanction the gobbling up of powdered horns and preserved penises from species on the verge of extinction, especially if the justification is based on unfounded claims about aphrodisiac properties. Nor would we necessarily accept chewing up live octopus in the macho rite of *ikezukuri* before its death struggle chokes the intrepid diner; or cutting open the skull of a live monkey to scoop out its brains even though it shares most of its genes with us.

“Do Asians eat dogs?” The worst reply diminishes the possibility of a civic discourse to which everyone can equally contribute. “*Whether or not I eat dogs, you don’t have to worry because I promise I won’t eat your dog.*” This response is flippant and does not deal with the real question, which is whether eating one’s own dog is wrong. There is no need to declare that it is inappropriate to eat the dogs of others. Even if that person’s dog is reduced to chattel—mere property—eating it violates their property rights, if nothing else. The Honolulu newspapers reported a dispute in 1950 that foreshadows later anxieties about dog eaters. A man said by Margaret Acosta to have eaten her missing dog, Floppy, successfully defended himself by admitting that he had eaten a dog on the night at issue.

He said, however, that his meal had been a black dog, not a white one. He was acquitted, because Floppy was white.<sup>15</sup>

But because the reassurance about not eating other people's dogs forecloses discussion, it is the worst reply. It isolates each of us within a culture and makes us outsiders to all others. Each of us can watch these others and study them, but none of us can comment or interact. The animal rights groups that censured the Cambodians in Long Beach were not mollified that the perpetrators were eating only their own dog, which was certainly not a pet. In bringing into play "the sensibilities of the community," they denied that immigrants might contribute to those sensibilities or be part of that community.

We forget that people can eat Asian foods but still have contempt for Asians. They can tune in to the Japanese television show *Iron Chef*—where a challenger and a master compete to produce a meal from the theme ingredient in Japanese, French, Chinese, or Italian cuisine—but still make fun of the antics of Asians, as if a game show epitomized a culture and the host, who parodies Western showmen of the past, represented an entire people. They can be patronizing toward the obsequious maitre d' and the subservient waiter, confusing the deferential manner of service professions with the behavior of racial groups. They can talk about the best "Chink" food or the best "Jap" food, even as they attempt clumsily to use their chopsticks to stab that morsel they have dropped on the table. Eating at a Chinese restaurant is not the same as "breaking bread" with Chinese people. A patron at a Japanese restaurant can racially ridicule the *teppenyaki* chef, who he has erroneously assumed cannot comprehend his rank prejudice. More than one Asian-American customer has cringed at the spectacle of the next table, where an Asian immigrant is humiliated by the Whites he is serving, the Asian smiling nervously in a gesture that is misconstrued by Whites as assent to the abuse. The spectator may be more keenly aware of the humiliation than the subject, but be similarly powerless because there is no means of saving face.

### **"What Do You Think?"**

There is a better answer to the question "Do Asians eat dogs?" It answers the question with another question: "What is the point of asking whether I eat dogs?" The accuser herself is cross-examined.

This rebuttal ensures that the question is not rhetorical, a set-up rather than an invitation to talk. Joan Rivers cannot be taken seriously, but she cannot be left alone. Detractors of dog eaters, such as those infuriated by Joey Skaggs, must be dispatched because they proceed in earnest. They believe that Asian-Americans are dog eaters and do not hesitate to reprimand them on that basis. In San Francisco in 1989, as officials sought to respond to rumors that Vietnamese immigrants were hunting dogs in Golden Gate Park, Vu-Duc Vuong, executive director of a refugee center, said, "There have been very few, if any, instances of pet eating... Far more numerous are anti-Asian prejudices and violence based on no more than false or racist stereotypes of Asian-Americans."<sup>16</sup>

Reducing the inhabitants of the Asian continent to dog eaters, i.e., defining them by a minor aspect of their multifaceted ways of life, is absurd. That characterization, however, often forms the basis for believing that Asians are inferior: the dogs are cute; the people are despicable. It is a circular trap. Only by assuming that American culture is superior can its vantage point be used to judge Asian culture in this regard. Insiders assume that their own culture is superior. They then find, based on their assumption, that it is so. In short, dog eating becomes an excuse to make Asians the butt of jokes and ultimately to disrespect complete cultures as primitive.

Instead, we need to inculcate within ourselves a sense of proportion. The behavior of Asian-Americans may be of interest to non-Asian-Americans for various reasons, but asking whether Asian-Americans are in the habit of eating dogs should not be used as a point of entry into exploring that behavior. Asian immigrants adjust their dietary routines as they adjust other aspects of their lives. Studies of Asian students who have moved to the United States show them gobbling up generous quantities of American-style junk foods, to their detriment.<sup>17</sup> Asian parents lament that their American children clamor for hamburgers and French fries, turning their noses up at even the celebratory dishes served on holidays. Pacific Islanders put together ingredients of their own with those from the United States, in a home-made fusion cuisine. They have invented, for example, the inimitable snack of Spam *masubi*. The Spam, a processed meat product identified with food stamps and cargo cults, is first fried, then wrapped in seaweed and placed on top of vinegared rice—a gristly variation of sushi, unlikely to be ordered up by yuppies sampling haute cuisine. Due to the islanders' genetic adaptation to food scarcity, the imported, fatty diet they now enjoy is causing an epidemic of morbid obesity.<sup>18</sup>

A few more rules are conducive to discussion. Whoever attacks a cultural practice must first understand it. Few of us have suffered as many Southeast Asians have—as civilians on the battlegrounds of war, with homes destroyed and stomachs empty—or as Koreans and Chinese have—enduring famine brought on by the authorities. Asian immigrant mothers may tell their children to finish the meat first because it has the highest nutritional value, but they probably do not tell their children to think of the starving children in Europe in order to cajole them into cleaning their plates.

If we critique a cultural practice, its origins and its context are relevant. Dogs compete with humans for resources. University of Pennsylvania professor James Serpell reports in his book *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* that in Chinese culture, “whereas the ruling elite took their affection for dogs or cats to bizarre and outrageous extremes, the mere idea of being fond of a dog or indeed any other kind of domestic animal was a concept alien to the mentality of the majority peasant population.”<sup>19</sup> Eating dogs appears to be a compensatory adaptation to material deprivation and the lack of reliable sources of other meats.

So if you can criticize my cultural practices, I should be able to criticize your cultural practices. The criticism must be reciprocal and between equals. If either of us calls on standards that are not generated within the culture we are criticizing, we must do our

utmost to make such standards as neutral as possible rather than just the enlargement of our preferences. It may be impossible to produce principles in a vacuum without the influence of our own backgrounds so as to bracket and set aside everything that is culturally specific, but at least we can become conscious of the constraints of either an Eastern or a Western worldview and conduct our discussion accordingly. Lest you be a hypocrite, you should be able to live up to the standards you would set.

And if, as a nation, we settle on stopping the practice of dog eating here and elsewhere, we are likely to be more effective if the means we use blend internal calls for reform with external demands for conformity. Otherwise, Asian-Americans who may not crave dogs may become justifiably resentful about regulations imposed on us without our input. Asian-Americans who refuse to submit to any interrogation about dog eating, frivolous or humorless, should be viewed sympathetically. No more than individuals do groups take kindly to being told what to do by the self-righteous.

These prerequisites to conversation should pertain to all communications across cultures. Without such indications of good faith, the responses—ranging from hostility to indifference toward what appears to be an unfair game—become much more appealing to Asian-Americans and anyone else who has minority status. The question “Do Asians eat dogs?” should not make Asian-Americans feel vulnerable.

It may be too difficult to satisfy all the conditions. We may need to proceed imperfectly, but each proviso that is not satisfied compromises the argument. For instance, former starlet Brigitte Bardot’s campaigns against dog eating are a luxury for her, disguising her involvement with French right-wing groups that aim to curtail immigration for racial reasons. She connects mistreatment of animals with an influx into France of non-Western peoples. Her high-profile antagonism toward dog eating is a confirmation of her privileged position and part of an extreme political agenda. It does not seem to be the result of study. Dealings with her and with those who argue similarly do not occur on fair terms.

The power to control the exchange distorts it. In Michael Moore’s 1989 documentary satire *Roger & Me*, the pundit interviews an impoverished woman who is selling rabbits by the roadside. She asks him if he wants one for a pet or for food. While those in the audience laugh out of squeamishness, they may be touched by her naive honesty. She recognizes poignantly both her own predicament of poverty and the fate of her furry animals.

The case against eating dogs that ought to command respect, possibly the only case that merits real attention, is the ascetic case for a vegetarian lifestyle. The prohibition against eating dogs becomes only a particular example in that line of reasoning. Many animal rights groups recognize as much. Peter Singer’s influential argument for animal liberation is based on the premise that some animals are sentient enough to share with us the traits that we believe give us moral autonomy and that prohibit us from treating individuals as a means to an end.<sup>20</sup> There could be no harsher reduction of any organism we recognize as having person-hood to the status of an object than to consume it literally and unnecessarily. It matters not that we may do so because we are satiated in the act. From such a perspective, the more enjoyment we derive, the worse our sin.

Although the animal-rights movement has long been derided as sentimental, if not hysterical, it has profited greatly from scientific advances. It is opposition to animal rights that now often seems motivated by ideology rather than empirical research, as in the indignant claim that God gave Adam dominion over the beasts, even as the latest studies substantiate both the notion that animals are like us and the suspicion that we are driven by material desires. Still, the biblical directive issued in Eden at the beginning to name the fish and the fowl—so unlike the injunction not to eat from the tree of knowledge—reminds us of the importance in Western culture of the divine Word and of the resonance, in any culture, of words in general.

It is only through our shared language that we can come to terms with ourselves and others. Higher primates have been taught enough American Sign Language to host a tea party and show a sense of humor. The best-trained hunting dogs, the retrievers in the field, can learn a vocabulary of as many as two hundred words. Both are restrained by the language we use: it is the language we expect to be obeyed, instantly and without quarrel. The dogs are limited further by our lack of fluency in their body language, growls, howls, and yelps: as Yi-Fu Tuan, a Chinese émigré essayist working deftly with European high culture has argued, we dominate our pets.<sup>21</sup> Conventionally, the roles are fixed and we are paternalistic. We would be as alarmed at the sight of dogs walking upright as in a Franz Kafka tale as we would be aghast at the sight of them being basted over the holidays or prodded with a meat thermometer.

This meta-discourse about dog eating—talking about how we can talk—turns out to be imperative. Setting the terms for the discussion becomes the discussion itself. The terms of discussion are transformed. And it is at this point, though not before, that the concession can be made that killing dogs to eat them is not a commendable activity. The dogs who are eaten are beaten to death to tenderize their flesh. They are intelligent enough to know about their impending execution; they are trusting enough to consent to it; and, most of all, they are sensitive enough to feel pain.

Pursuant to the revised argument, the objection to eating dogs must be expanded to include other animals—for example, pigs. It should be extended to similar cases to prevent being suspect as a selective sensitivity. Pigs also can be housebroken, though they will revert to feral status in just two generations if returned to the wild. Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs even acquired momentary status as chic pets. More than dogs, pigs resemble human beings, which is why pigs are widely used in medical research on human disease, and xenotransplants of porcine hearts are a realistic possibility. The modern processing plants for pigs are hardly more humane for the efficiency of their mass slaughter. Upton Sinclair's muckraking 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, was an accurate report of the grisly methods of meat packing.<sup>22</sup> If any stage of the process were photographed, the pictures of "Babe" from the movies meeting his demise would be as disturbing as that of any dog hanging by a homemade noose. Were we all still to visit the local butcher before cooking supper, or if we had to raise and slaughter our own fowl for guests, rather than ingesting packaged and prepared products, we might more easily embrace the eating of dogs or swear off eating all meat.

After all, the guests at a down-home pig pick'n line up to help themselves to moist pork plucked by hand from the remains of a pink and smooth-skinned suckling who sports a baseball cap that has scrawled on it the name he was given the day before in homage to the guest of honor who is being feted. The swine has a tomato stuffed in his open mouth and cherries where his eyes once sat; his ears are still pricked up as if to hear the comments about his delicious haunches. The replacement of a word identifying the dead mammal that has been tended diligently all day as it turned on the barbecue spit or that is hidden under the lid of a fancy serving tray in the buffet line is enough to turn our impatient craving into the urge to vomit. How puzzling it is. ☹

#### NOTES

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