

China's Secret: The Plight of Stray Cats

While some cats are fortunate enough to be pampered, spoiled, and housed in luxurious homes, others lurk in alleyways, scampering from shadow to shadow searching for meager scraps to eat. Many of these stray cats are looked upon unfavorably by passersby and are often seen as burdens on society, wild animals who harbor diseases and threats to the susceptible public. Because cats are so innumerable in certain cities of China, the public often does not notice missing cats from the crowded streets. Living and dying in gruesome conditions, stray cats in China not only live lives filled with danger and neglect, but are at a high risk of being cruelly treated for government clean-ups, food, and fashion's fur.

As China was gearing up for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the government began smoothing out any flaws that would negatively affect the Olympics in any way, from lessening factory pollution to correcting signs that have been mistranslated. The government was also working on something else: a campaign that notified Beijing residents about dangerous stray cats that could carry potentially life-threatening diseases. Because stray cats are often seen roaming the streets of Beijing, the government sought to clean up the streets before the Olympics began. Unfortunately, these government campaigns, one of which even attributed the SARS outbreak to these cats, have led to mild hysteria in the city. A Daily Mail article by Simon Perry reported that many Beijing residents abandoned their cats out of fear of the possible diseases they carry. These abandoned cats, as well as stray and feral cats, are then picked up by "special collection teams." They are then either sent to Guangzhou to cat

markets or are brought to compounds where they are held under cruel conditions. In Perry's report, an animal activist says that, "Disease spreads quickly among them and they die slowly in agony and distress. The government won't even do the cats the kindness of giving them lethal injections when they become sick." Further hysteria can be seen when two kindergarten teachers killed six stray cats, two of them pregnant, by beating them with sticks, fearing the possible dangers they could pose to the students ("China Kills Thousands"). Although there may be some truth behind the fact that stray cats carry diseases, this inhumane method of dealing with stray cats further proves the need for awareness and change towards the plight of cats.

In some areas in China, particularly the southern area of Guangzhou, cats are occasionally eaten as delicacies. A popular saying in China is "The Cantonese will eat anything that flies, except airplanes, and anything with legs, except a chair." This is evident in the popularity of cat consumption in Guangzhou, the residence of many Cantonese. While some cats are raised on "cat farms" specifically for the purpose of appearing on restaurant menus, others are strays taken directly off the street. In 2006, the Shanghai Small Animal Association found that some Shanghai street vendors supplemented kebabs with cat meat, often originating from stray cats taken from the streets (Hartwell). Although these cases are rare in the northern cities, about 10,000 cats are consumed every day during the winter in the province of Guangzhou (Barnett). Crammed into crowded cages of bamboo or metal with other cats, these cats have barely enough room to maneuver around before they are skinned and boiled for their meat. Some are still breathing their last desperate breaths as they lay in shock

in the boiling waters (“China Protestors”). These cats are later turned into dishes customary in Guangzhou, such as “Dragon Duels with Tiger,” which consists of a combination of snakes, cats and herbs. Although this dish was banned due to the SARS outbreak in 2003, restaurants have continued to sell this dish after the health scare was no longer much of a threat (Honge). There are only a few cases in which stray cats are saved: on June 13th, 2006, about a hundred animal rights defenders protested against the slaughter of cats in a local restaurant that sold cat meatballs and soup in Shenzhen. Due to the protests and signs that had protests such as “Love Little Animals, Respect Life,” the owner of the Fangji Cat Meatball Restaurant had no choice but to lock up and leave (Zhang and Song). However, other cats are not as fortunate. About a thousand cats are transported from Nanjing to Guangzhou, where they are later distributed to other cities in the province. People often earn a living catching cats, disregarding whether or not these cats are strays or domesticated pets, and selling them, making about one to three dollars per cat. Unfortunately, cat trades like these have been around for a decade and do not violate the nonexistent laws China has on the consumption of cats, making it difficult for local authorities to end this animal cruelty (Mu).

Cats are not only slaughtered for their meat, but in certain parts of China, millions of cats are killed annually for their fur (Seacrest). According to an undercover investigation conducted by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), millions of cats are strangled, beaten, and bled to death so that their fur can be made into decorations and linings on coats. The gruesome conditions the cats go through to

supply humans with fur are horrifying: they are transported from city to city for days without food and water, often amongst as many as twenty other diseased, injured, and even dead cats in the same cage. They are constantly thrown to the ground between these transactions, often crushing their helpless legs in the process. Yet consumers in countries such as the US, to whom China is a major supplier, are unaware of the brutal processes cats undergo to make expensive fur garments. Because labeling on products are often intentionally mislabeled, potential buyers are misled into buying these garments without knowing of its origins (“China’s Shocking”). Another undercover investigation from Swiss Animal Protection/EAST International reveals that, like the cats in Guangzhou, many of these cats are also skinned alive. Because there are no government laws or regulations on fur farms in China, animals such as cats can be raised, sheltered, and murdered under extremely painful conditions. In fur farms like these, cats are frequently driven to insanity from crowded spaces, brutal treatment, and minimal healthcare (“A Shocking Look”).

Cats are not the only victims to the illegal fur trade. Animals such as dogs, tigers, leopards, foxes, minks, and even rabbits are subject to the cruel treatment of being slaughtered for their fur, in places not only in China but around the world as well. Like cats, many of these furs are mislabeled and passed off as something that is seemingly more “humane.” Yet the only way to stop this illegal fur trade is to not purchase fur at all. As a popular campaign by WildAid once said, “When the Buying Stops, the Killing Can Too.” This holds true not only for endangered species such as leopards and tigers but for seemingly ordinary animals such as cats and dogs. We hold

a responsibility, as humans, to respect animals and stop animal cruelty. Even seemingly insignificant steps towards the relief for animals contribute to the cause against animal fur trade; if more individuals stopped purchasing fur products, the fur trade will no longer be profitable and fur products will greatly decrease.

The same method of thinking can be applied to cat meat, as well. Every individual has the power to raise voices and protest against cat consumption in areas such as Guangzhou. This can produce monumental effects and can lead to bans on cat meat or the removal of cat cuisines in many restaurants. Yet protesting is just one of the many solutions one can do to raise awareness. By writing letters to your local government, you can help bring to light the problems stray cats face in your country. After all, the horrendous fates stray cats face not only occurs in China but in other countries as well. Many of these cats are missing homes and are greatly in need of a shelter where necessary health care can be provided. Donating to local shelters or major animal shelter and adoption organizations, such as the Animal Shelter or the Second Chance Animal Aid Shanghai Organization, can make a difference in a cat's life and provide needed support for the cause of felines. The fact that the cat species lead two jarringly different lives of homelessness versus domestication calls for change, and change for the better can be reached through the work of individuals who have the potential to make a difference in the animal world.

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