



Being wild, being delicious, being dangerous



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Abstract

There is a long history of Chinese people eating wild animals to keep healthy, and today bushmeat is not only a diet but also a display of personal wealth. Some Chinese tend to order rare animals for important guests to reflect their significance. In these cases, wild animals in China are treated as medicinal resources, as rare goods or as a bargaining chip in business, but not as creatures who share the Earth with human beings. After the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the Chinese started to become aware of the harm of eating bushmeat, and the government banned some bushmeat for a couple of months. However, with the announcement of SARS's ending, the bushmeat business was back on the market in a short time. In 2020, the occurrence of COVID-19 steered China towards controversy, stressing the problem of the bushmeat market in China. The origin of COVID-19 is still currently unclear, so this study does not mean to accuse any country or judge anything; this epidemic is a tragedy for everyone on this planet, no race and no country should be blamed for this. However, bushmeat restaurants are a deeply rooted problem that should be solved. The owner of a Chinese bushmeat restaurant is interviewed for this essay, illustrating the situation of Chinese bushmeat restaurants, discussing the relationship between bushmeat business, orders from the government and the epidemic.



Keywords:

COVID-19, Chinese bushmeat restaurant, animal rights protection, SARS, civet, culling operation.

1. Introduction

"[E]very part of the civet is a treasure, and their meat could be served as food, their fat is a rare and exclusive raw material in cosmetic production..." (Li 2020). This description comes from a Chinese children's book, *The Brief Encyclopedia of Animals*, published in 2011 by Wuhan University Press. As a popular book for 5–7-year-old children, it was also republished many times after 2011, but the content about civets didn't change at all. In 2020, a parent uploaded a picture of this description online. Then, the press took this book off the shelves because of the wide denouncement from the public.

There is an ancient saying in China: "You are what you eat". Ancient Chinese believed uncommon exotic animals are good for their health. Traditional Chinese doctors also agree with the saying to some extent, claiming some animal organs have special functions for certain parts of the human body. For instance, they think eating the liver can be useful for your eyes (Dharmananda 2001). Modern studies claim that this is because the liver contains abundant Vitamin A, which is beneficial to human eyes. However, some

people simplified this idea as that if you want to strengthen any part of your body, just eat the same piece of animals; the rarer the nonhuman animal is, the better.

Why were people angry with the description of civets while there is a long history in China of using wild animals as a valid way to keep healthy? In 2002, the first case of SARS appeared in Guangdong, China, and within nine months SARS killed 919 people worldwide, up to 10.8% of its victims. It was the first Public Health Emergency of International Concern (aka, PHEIC) declared by WHO. As the starting point of SARS, mainland China got 5,327 cases out of 8,422 in total (by August 16th, 2003), which caused severe losses there (Baidu, n.d.b).

In 2004, Chinese research organizations claimed that civets were the origin of SARS, which was supported by the information that the SARS virus in civets is at least 99.8% similar to the SARS virus in humans, and civets could infect humans directly. The Guangdong region, where the first outbreak of SARS occurred, was a significant consumer of civets in China. In January of this year, authorities in Guangdong announced that they were to eradicate civets in their province to cut off the source of infection. They killed more than 10,000 of civets, badgers and raccoon dogs in five days (from January 5 to 10th) (Sina News 2004). However, an epidemiologist from CDC, Ruiheng Xu, declared to reporters of Sohu News: "The expert group advises not to kill [civets], but to take charge of them, and any form of transportation, raising or eating civets should be banned" (Xiao and Xu 2004).

Since then, civets were seen as a taboo ingredient causing the fatal 2002-2004 virus and as the one that was responsible for it all in China for a long time. That changed in 2017, when a group of Chinese scientists found the host of the SARS virus to be a single population of horseshoe bats in Yunnan province, and people realized that civets were just an intermediate host of the SARS virus (Cyranoski 2017). Still, China learned a lot from SARS and, after people started to boycott wild animals in restaurants spontaneously, the Chinese government revised the Chinese Wildlife Protection Act in 2004, in order to protect wild animals by means of legislation. Did wild animals and Chinese live happily ever after? Of course not.

In May 2004, the Chinese government announced SARS had officially ended. In August of the same year, the State Forestry Administration published the list of 54 terrestrial wildlife with sophisticated farming techniques for commercial operation. Civets were still on this list.

In 2004, there were 16 thousand breeding grounds for wild animals in China, generating 20 billion Chinese Yens a year. And those were only the legal ones, the tip of the iceberg. The industry kept growing after SARS, and the voice of strong objection to wildlife restaurants became lower and lower (Nei.st 2020).

2. Bushmeat consumption in China

Seventeen years after SARS, in 2020, the new coronavirus (COVID-19) broke out

in China. At the beginning of this incident, a couple of studies from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention considered that the new coronavirus came from Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. Even though later other scholars claimed that this market was not the origin of this virus (Yu et al. 2020), actually the earliest track of COVID-19 so far is the sample of wastewater in Spain (Liu 2020), but what is clear is that Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market is the flashpoint of COVID-19.

As the most significant aquatic products wholesale market in Wuhan and Central China, there are many different kinds of products you could purchase in Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, and sea flesh was just a small part of their business. Like in some other Chinese farmers' markets, people who wanted fresh meat could ask for live animals –and if they didn't want to kill the animal by themselves, they could also ask the owner for help, which was free. Of course, you could also choose packaged goods in some stores there.

But what has made this market the target of public criticism is not that farmed animals are killed cruelly. According to Xinhua News, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention collected samples from the market twice. By testing those 585 samples, it showed that 33 of the specimens were positive for the new coronavirus, and 93.9% of the positive examples existed in the west part of the market, which is also the district with a vast wildlife trade (Wang 2020).

Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market closed down on January 1, 2020, to avoid severer infections. However, if you searched online, you could still find bushmeat to purchase by January 22. When a reporter from Red Star News asked one of the owners how they could judge if the wild animal contains a virus or not, the assistant answered: "They are not acting crazy, and they don't bite" (Red Star News 2020). If you searched online for bushmeat at the end of 2020, you could not find any; the shops stated they had bushmeat earlier and cleared all products from their online shop.

"It will be a tough year for us... not only us but all restaurant owners", Qian Jiang, the owner of a Chinese restaurant I interviewed for this paper, told me. He also stated: "Our restaurant hasn't opened for about one month, we usually just closed for seven days for Spring Festival's sake". On March 1, 2020, Qian and I had an online interview. I had previously visited his restaurant many times because of family get-togethers, which are always held in nice restaurants in China.

Qian Jiang's restaurant offers customers bushmeat off and on. Sometimes customers even need to reserve during the peak season. He named his restaurant The Farmhouse when it was opened in October 2005. The Farmhouse is not only a restaurant but also Qian Jiang's house. The house stands five stories high. He uses rooms on the first and second floor as dining rooms and lives in the third and fourth floor with his wife. This restaurant also has an underground parking lot in case customers don't have a place to park at peak times. At the back of the building, there is an open-air hall, where the customers can walk or chat and where he kitchen is on the right of the room,

where the customers can go in and check the progress of their dishes or watch when they are killing the animals to make sure they are being served fresh meat.

As a bit of a local celebrity, Qian Jiang is proud of his restaurant: "Our restaurant always offers the freshest dishes, my wife exclusively makes all cuisines, no one else could cook the same flavor". Traditionally, there are eight famous Chinese cuisines —Shandong, Sichuan, Hunan, Guangdong (Cantonese), Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui and Fujian cuisines. What Qian Jiang's restaurant offers is Hunan cuisine, which is renowned for its spicy flavor.

In China, a traditional and standard meal must contain some "hard dishes", which are always meat, the kind of ingredient that was hard to get or expensive to purchase in ancient times. People in Guangdong always use bushmeat as the ingredients for different soups, while people in Hunan always use bushmeat with stew or fry in their way. Every "hard dish" is spicy, "it will make the dish absorb the flavors and taste better", Qian Jiang explains.

With the development of Chinese economy, people now can afford much more expensive food in their daily life. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, per capita meat consumption in China in 2017 rose about 15 times compared with the data in the 1960s (Ritchie and Roser 2017).

"The customers who like to order bushmeat are always rich, or in power, they need to show their good taste and high social status", Qian Jiang said. "Sometimes if someone wants to ask for another's help, he would invite the helper to dinner. In that case, he would need some 'hard dishes,' which is better if it is made of rare animals", he adds.

A day in a Chinese restaurant starts early. Qian Jiang needs to get up when it's still dark outside to get the freshest vegetables and meat in the farmers' market, which is usually around six in the morning. Qian is very confident of his skills for choosing those right ingredients: "I can tell the difference between greenhouse vegetable and vegetable planted naturally". He insists that it is the only way to make the most authentic farm dishes, that is also why he thinks offering wildlife in his restaurant is correct: "Here we are, near the mountains, this wildlife is the most authentic dishes for residents here. That's what The Farmhouse does — offer the most authentic dishes for its customers".

After purchasing the ingredients for the day, Qian goes back to the restaurant and watches the employees prepare for lunch, or takes a nap, waiting for the upcoming customers at lunch.

Lunch and dinner can be hectic for them, since both of them always last 2 to 3 hours and, during this time, Qian needs to guide the customers and serve tables. "We don't put bushmeat on the menu, because it always sells fast, I usually recommend it as today's special if we have any", he says. And he adds: "Sometimes people will reserve bushmeat, but I never let any customer cut in

line no matter how rich or powerful the man or woman is, 'first come, first served'".

Qian always buys bushmeat from local dealers, who have a stable supply of wildlife, but sometimes he also purchases it from the hunters when available, which is cheaper. However, dealers cannot ensure continuous supply of wild animals. Qian explains: "Summer is the best season because you can buy some popular seafood such as local turtles, rock frogs and mandarin fish; some delicious birds like bamboo partridges and turtledoves; and also (terrestrial wild animals) like bamboo rats, snakes, and hares. But during winter, what you can get is only a small group of boar and muntjac".

His words remind me of the first time I went to this restaurant with my parents to have lunch. At that time, I was sitting near the kitchen and I saw a middle-aged man peeling something. I moved closer to see better what he was doing. Then I saw a couple of partridges huddled together. The man picked up one of them and cut her neck. The partridge struggled madly. After dropping her blood into a bowl, the man threw the partridge aside, ignoring that she wasn't completely dead and was suffering from the pain. After the partridge was totally gone, one of the employees put it into hot water to skin her.

However, not all wild animals are killed on the spot, like the partridge. "We need to make a decision", Qian says, "for animals like partridge, which are hard to keep at home, we need to kill them quickly, and what is more important is that this kind of animals can be kept in the fridge, the flavor of their meat will be still nice and fresh". For animals like snake and local turtle, Qian claims that they have to be alive until someone orders them, because "otherwise, their meat will taste bad".

During the peak season of bushmeat, customers can visit the wildlife hold in the restaurant and choose the preferred one for the meal. They also can choose to watch the whole process, the killing and cooking. Children are also allowed to view all. "We allow everyone to go anywhere in the first and second floor", Qian says, "the kitchen is an open area that everyone can go in and check what's going on".

3. "The solution": Fresh bushmeat

When asked about the relationship between the new coronavirus and bushmeat, Qian stated: "I watched TV, and the experts said this virus came from wild animals, I think they should blame these unscrupulous businessmen. They must have sold customers stale animals; those animals have been dead for a long time; that's why the virus comes from wildlife". He believes that if everyone could guarantee they only sell fresh bushmeat, then nothing will go wrong.

"I don't think the license for using wildlife in business works", Qian says, "people like me don't need it to guarantee their bushmeat is fine and nontoxic, people who are unscrupulous will always do the same thing". To get the license, the owners have to meet five conditions: 1) Employing professional staff with

excellent breeding skills; 2) Have a fixed place for the animals; 3) Get animals from legal sources; 4) They must offer enough food to the animals kept in their facilities, and 5) They must be able to provide medical services to the animals, at least to some extent (Baidu, n.d.a).

As for the influence the new disease outbreak brings to bushmeat, Qian states that his restaurant will respond to the call of the government. However, unlike other restaurant owners, Qian sees this new coronavirus as an opportunity: "After that, people will choose the restaurant they trust to have meals, which could be great for us because we always treat customers sincerely. It is a great chance to let the customers know which is the most reliable restaurant". But he doesn't think the government will ban the bushmeat he serves to the customers: "The bushmeat we served was the most regulated ones, we will never do anything illegal. But I don't think it's a big deal to offer bushmeat after that as long as we don't serve the dangerous and toxic ones".

When searching "civet" in Chinese on Google for this paper, the top three results were "images of civet", "civet in Wikipedia", and "how to kill a civet". In the third webpage, the author writes: "You couldn't eat a wild civet, but it's ok if it's farmed, every part of civet is treasure... their meat is edible and also can treat illness", and "if you are killing farmed civets, make sure to skin them immediately after killing them". Then the article lists some advantages the civet has for the human body and shares a recipe about how to make soup with civet meat (Yang 2017).

No matter what kind of wildlife you search online in Chinese, you can always find what they are used for, which usually comes from ancient Chinese books. For some wild animals, you can also find questions asked by people: "How to cook them?" "How to kill them?" "What is the best way to eat them?"

Compared with the public concern about wildlife's nutritive value, people care less about their living conditions. At the moment of closing this paper, the majority of Chinese news media were trying to get people to stop eating bushmeat. If a search for "Chinese bushmeat" in Chinese on Google was conducted, all the news were criticizing people who like to eat bushmeat, warning them how dangerous it is, how bad it could be for the human body and our society. Not until page 7 of the search I could find a article about pangolin, in this case discussing how pangolins are treated in Africa (Lu 2019). Also, no matter what search engine you use, it is pretty easy to see how many people was infected by SARS or how many people died of SARS. However, what about the death toll of civets killed by authorities in Guangdong in five days? There is no official or unofficial record. Some websites in English, like Wikipedia, stated that 10,000 civet cats, badgers and raccoon dogs were killed because of SARS only in this short period.

I will never forget the partridge that died in front of me, how she struggled, how she screamed. I don't believe in god, but that's the moment I felt the original sin inside my body.



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