

February 5, 2010

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Dog Days in China

By ROGER COHEN

NEW YORK — I see the Beckhams, David and Victoria (Posh), have acquired a couple of “micro pigs” as pets and that said pigs (65 pounds when fully grown) are now a fashionable item in Britain, at least among those who can afford a \$1,000-plus price tag.

Perhaps Beckham is heeding Churchill, who had a penchant for pigs. The great man’s verdict: “Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you. Give me a pig. He just looks you in the eye and treats you as an equal.”

Churchill’s view has some scientific basis. Pigs are smart and sociable. They’ve had a pretty bad rap, however. Two of the world’s great monotheistic religions — Judaism and Islam — prohibit their consumption. Generally, the notion of pigs as pets seems bizarre or repellent.

Why? There’s nothing rational about the view that taking a pig for a walk on a leash is weird, while eating a pork chop, if you so choose, is reasonable. But then, after a visit to China, it seems to me that reason has little or nothing to do with the way we view animals and food.

The Chinese, for example, eat dog (as well as cats, but I’m going to focus on dogs here). They ascribe to dog meat a formidable “warming” quality — the Chinese divide nutrition into “hot” and “cold” elements and seek balance between them — which makes it prized in many regions during winter.

Now, we are appalled in the West at the notion of eating dog while considering it natural to have a dog as a pet — I own a Beagle myself (“Ned”) and I’m very fond of him. This is the inverse of the preponderant Western view of pigs: fine to eat (religious objections aside) but not to pet.

But do pigs have any more or less of a soul than dogs? Are they any more or less sentient? Do they suffer any more or less in death? Are they any more or less part of the mysterious unity of life? I think not.

There is a rational, and for some people a spiritual, case for being a vegetarian: Killing animals is wrong. However I cannot see a rational argument for saying eating dogs or cats is barbaric while eating pork or beef is fine. If you eat meat you cannot logically find it morally or ethically repugnant to eat a particular meat (I’m setting cannibalism aside here.)

That’s the theory at least. Yet I must confess I’ve been having a hard time. My bout of anguish began a few weeks back on a wintry night in central China, in the restless megalopolis of Chongqing. I was cold, wet and seeking refuge.

“What’s that?” I asked my resourceful interpreter, Xiyun Yang, pointing to a steamy, crowded establishment with a big red neon sign (the Chinese approach is, when in doubt, make it gaudy).

“You don’t want to know.”

“I think I do.”

“It’s a dog restaurant.” It was then that I noticed the image of a puppy with floppy ears beside the Chinese characters.

I gave Xiyun a long, hard look. “Dog’s really good,” she said. “I love it.”

Images of Ned (and his floppy ears) popped into my head, as well as thoughts of what I’d tell my daughter, but I’d come to admire Xiyun’s gastronomic antennae (particularly for Sichuan noodles) and I tend to adhere to the I’ll-try-anything-once school. In we went.

The menu was predictably dog-dominated: dog paws, dog tail, dog brain, dog intestine, even dog penis. We went for a dog broth, simmered for four hours, with Sichuan pepper and ginger. It was warming, with a pepper-tingle. The meat was tender, unctuous, blander than pork, but stronger than chicken. Later, the owner, Chen Zemin, explained how the best dogs for eating had yellow coats, weighed 30 pounds, and did miracles for arthritis.

I’ll take Chen’s word for it. Dog was not easy for me. The memory has proved hard to digest.

As it happened, our meal came shortly before the eruption of a furious online debate in China over a proposed “anti-animal maltreatment” law that would outlaw the eating and selling of dog and cat meat, making it punishable by fines of more than \$700 and 15 days of detention.

The legislation, now under review, immediately came under heavy fire. One restaurant owner in the Chaozhou region declared: “This is ridiculous! You make dog and cat meat illegal, but aren’t chickens, duck, goose, pig, cow, lamb also animals?” Another noted a local saying: “When the dog meat is being simmered, even the gods become dizzy with hunger.”

I’m with these indignant protesters. I’m not happy that I ate dog. But I’m happy China eats dog. It so proclaims both a particularity to be prized in a homogenizing world and its rationality. Anyone who doesn’t want China to eat dog must logically embrace pigs as pets.

But, as I’ve learned, logic has its limits. It’s the heart not the head that governs this world under the sway of the dizzy gods.

Copyright 2010

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)