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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

It's Too Hot for Dog on the Menu

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THOSE who hope to taste dog meat when they visit Beijing for this summer's Olympics may be disappointed. The Beijing Catering Trade Association has ordered all 112 designated Olympic restaurants to take dog off the menu, and has strongly advised other establishments to stop serving it until September. Waiters have been urged to "patiently" suggest alternative dishes to customers who ask for dog. It's all part of a wider campaign to avoid offending foreigners during the Games. (Beijingers have also been told to line up nicely, to stop spitting and even to avoid asking tourists questions about their ages, salaries and love lives.)

The order is not likely to bother many residents. Though dogs have been raised for food in China for thousands of years, you have to hunt around to find the meat on modern menus. Certain regions, like Hunan and Guizhou Provinces, are known for their canine predilections — but even in these places, dog is a relative rarity. And in Beijing itself, you hardly find it except in a few Korean and regional Chinese restaurants.

Dog eating, in any case, tends to be a seasonal pursuit. According to Chinese folk dietetics, which classify every food according to its heating and cooling properties, dog is one of the "hottest" meats around, best eaten in midwinter, when you need warmth and vital energy, not in sultry August.

That eating dog is seen as an issue says more about Western preoccupations than Chinese habits. Since time immemorial, Westerners have had a morbid fascination with the weird fringes of the Chinese diet. [Marco Polo](#) noted with distaste that the Chinese liked eating snake and dog; modern Western journalists just love to get their teeth into a juicy story about some revolting delicacy like the assorted animal penises served at the Guolizhuang restaurant in Beijing. And for gung-ho foreign tourists, a skewerful of deep-fried scorpions in the night market in central Beijing has become a rite of passage.

In case you're wondering, there is nothing alarming about the taste of dog: smothered in chilies and aromatic spices in a Hunanese winter stew, it might remind you of lamb. For a Westerner, eating it can feel a little strange, but is it morally different from eating, say, pork? The dogs brought to table in China are not people's pets, but are raised as food, like pigs. And pigs, of course, are also intelligent and friendly.

So what has induced the Chinese government to ban the serving of dog meat during the Olympics? One might observe that when it comes to important issues like human rights in Tibet, Chinese leaders don't seem to care what the rest of the world thinks, yet when it comes to dietary niceties, they kowtow to the most irrational foreign prejudice.

It's partly because the "issue" of dog-eating seems to be a magnet for animal rights activists. Many Westerners are genuinely shocked and offended at the idea of eating an animal they consider to be "man's best friend."

Other morally questionable food practices — such as eating shark’s fin and cutting up live turtles — don’t appear to bother them so much. And after the Tibet riots and the [Olympic torch](#) debacle earlier this year, Beijing is keen to minimize the chance of more public relations disasters. South Korea likewise banned dog from menus during the 1988 Seoul Olympics in the hope of avoiding bad publicity.

Opinions about dog-eating are changing in China, too, as more people come to see dogs as adorable pets. A message board on [sohu.com](#), one of the most popular Chinese-language Internet news sites, was peppered with posts supporting the ban. “The barbaric custom of eating dog should be illegal,” said one writer. Another wrote, “Thanks to the Olympics for bringing an advance in social civilization.”

Perhaps the key reason for the ban is a pervasive Chinese embarrassment about behavior that Westerners might consider “backward” (luo hou), like spitting, shoving your way onto a crowded bus — or eating dog. Despite their country’s meteoric rise as an international player, many Chinese, still smarting from the historical humiliation of the 19th-century opium wars against Britain, are acutely sensitive to foreign criticism. They share their government’s desire to present a clean, modern image to the world.

The irony is that many of the things the Chinese increasingly see as “backward” are those most attractive to foreigners: street traders, wet markets selling fresh produce, narrow hutong alleyways and higgledy-piggledy houses. Why go to Beijing if all you see is skyscrapers and Starbucks? Westerners commenting on the dog ban on the Web have been divided between approving dog-lovers and people outraged at Beijing’s failure to stick up for Chinese culture and tradition. In the end, those most likely to lament the ban are tourists hoping to shock their friends back home with wild tales of eating doggy hotpot.

Fuchsia Dunlop is the author of “Shark’s Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China.”

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