

## **The Plight of Dogs in the Country-City Gap: Reading Chinese Dog Narratives across Genres\***

Chen Hong

Research Center for Comparative Literature and World Literatures  
Shanghai Normal University, China

### **Abstract**

A rapid increase in the number of pet dogs in Chinese cities since the late 1980s, and the prosperity of the pet industry as a result, seem to indicate that dogs have been accepted as worthy companions for humans, and that pet dogs have thereby become a comfortable part of the Chinese dream of a prosperous and harmonious future. Yet just outside the frame of this bright and hopeful picture looms another huge group of dogs who have been removed from rather than accepted into the human world, often in ways that are extremely cruel and barbaric. This article examines this perplexing contrast in connection to Chinese modernization and urbanization, which is situated within the larger context of the Anthropocene. By placing the situation of urban stray dogs—and the prosperity of the urban pet industry—alongside the deteriorating condition of country dogs, the article looks at the condition of dogs in relation to the serious internal and external social inequalities involving humans and dogs in today's China. Reading Chinese dog narratives across genres, it argues that the promise of prosperity, security and harmony is just part of the myth of modernization and urbanization.

### **Keywords**

Chinese dog narratives, “bare life,” inter-species chain, Chinese modernization and urbanization, Anthropocene

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The concept of the Anthropocene is socially, economically, and, above all, ecologically important as it brings into focus the unprecedented force and scope of the human impact on the functioning of our “Earth system” through accelerating forces of production and human consumption. Though the concept of the Anthropocene itself is macroscopic in nature, and discussions of it tend to focus on evidence of the general impact of human activities on the global environment—for example, climate change and the possibility of the extinction of various species including the human one in the not too far distant future—the fact remains that the human impact has always been felt in specific ways in different parts of the planet. A case in point here is the effect of Chinese modernization and urbanization—as part of the global enterprise of rapid development in the period of “the Great Acceleration”<sup>1</sup>—on the condition of companion dogs.

In fact, research shows that the pet (especially dog) population started to grow rapidly in big European and American cities in the nineteenth century as these cities themselves grew at the peak of the Industrial Revolution (Daly). An apparently similar situation seems to now exist in contemporary China, where modernization and urbanization are progressing at an ever-faster pace. A rapid increase in the number of pet dogs in Chinese cities since the late 1980s, and the growing prosperity of the pet industry as a result—global enterprises situated mainly in the advanced West have made a significant contribution to this—indicate that dogs have been increasingly suitable human companions and thus have become part of the Chinese dream of a prosperous and harmonious future.

However, there exists another huge group of dogs who have been removed from the human world and have often been treated in extremely cruel and barbaric ways. In fact, whereas most of the books and films about pet dogs available in the Chinese market since the 1980s come from abroad, mainly from the United States, Western Europe, and Japan,<sup>2</sup> Chinese dog stories and films from the same period are mostly about country dogs and are found mainly in the subaltern narratives (底層敘事 *diceng xushi*) of the poor and the powerless. More recent documentaries, especially since 2010, show that the life of both urban stray dogs and country dogs is one of poverty, suffering, and violence.

A number of questions arise from these observations. How do we explain the

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<sup>1</sup> Will Steffen and others propose that the new geological epoch called the Anthropocene began with “the advent of the Industrial Revolution around 1800” and entered the period of “the Great Acceleration” from the end of World War II to the present (842, 849).

<sup>2</sup> Dog stories translated into Chinese or dog movies released in China include: *101 Dalmatians*, *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*, *Quill*, *Hachi-ko*, *Eight Below*, *Cats and Dogs*, *Marley and Me*, and *Ten Promises to My Dog*, among many others.

radical difference between China's city dogs and its country dogs? How can we understand this longstanding city-country gap in the context of the advance of modernization and urbanization? What exactly is the role of Chinese modernization as a major economic driving force in this current stage of the Anthropocene—particularly with regard to changes in nature-culture and human-canine relations? With these questions in mind, then, I want to examine this “dog issue” in the perplexing context of the prosperity of the pet industry in the city, the growing number of urban stray dogs and the deteriorating condition of country dogs. In fact, some people already regard the presence of dogs in densely-populated urban areas as well as newly-developed suburban areas as a nuisance, even as a threat. The term “dog malady” (狗患 *gou huan*) expresses their hostility towards the animal and explains much of the abuse of and cruelty to dogs by individuals as well as some local governments. Others, mainly animal rights activists and dog lovers, are shocked to see this hostile attitude manifested in such radical measures as dog-killing movements and dog-meat festivals, where country dogs are again the major targets.

Of course, this “dog issue” is closely tied to serious social inequalities where now we see both humans and dogs as belonging to an inter-species chain. Through a reading of Chinese dog narratives across genres, this paper then will argue that the promise of prosperity, security, and harmony is, for both those humans and canines who are at the bottom of Chinese society, nothing but a myth of modernization and urbanization—although in fact it is the people and dogs living in the country that suffer most. The texts to be examined in this paper include fictional narratives, “Peace Dog” (2005), “Rabies” (2002), and “Defense in a Dream” (1987); movies, *Cala, My Dog* (2003) and *Postmen in the Mountains* (1999); and documentaries, *The Condition of Dogs* (2001), *The Hanzhong Dog-Killing Incident Caused a Dispute* (2009), and *The Yulin Dog-Meat Festival, A Crime at a Bite?* (2012).

### Dogs as “Bare Life”

Statistics show that pet dog markets in urban China have been growing at an incredible speed since the late 1980s as the cities expand in size and population.<sup>3</sup> As

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<sup>3</sup> Take Beijing for example: the number of registered dogs in 2009 was nearly one million, 6 times more than it was in 2003 (“A Twenty-Year Change”). Whereas in Chengdu, one of the most prosperous cities in Southwestern China, the increase in the number of pet dogs has been even more rapid, with a tenfold increase between 2003 and 2007 (*Regulations*). The most updated data from the Chinese pet industry show that the annual sales in 2015 reached an amazing total of over seven billion US dollars and are expected to maintain a thirty-percent annual increase in the future (“Pet Market”).

the pet industry increasingly becomes a vital part of Chinese modernization and urbanization, pet-keeping has also become a commonplace practice—one that more and more prosperous urbanites can afford. At the same time we have the ever-increasing number of stray dogs in the cities, how do we explain the various crimes committed against dogs that seem to become more vicious? And then how do we account for the role of the countryside in further perpetuating what might have seemed at first solely an urban illness? And how do we understand the various ways in which humans are controlling their dogs as being part of the negative effect of Chinese modernization?

What will be obvious to readers of the dog narratives selected for this paper is that dogs, at least in China, are totally exposed to their human masters and are being killed in the most wanton and cruel ways. To understand why or how these innocent creatures, who are supposed to be our dearest companions at home, could ever be treated like this and often without the perpetrators being given any punishment, we need to take a brief look at Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," which he borrows from Walter Benjamin and develops on the basis of Michel Foucault's idea of "biopolitics." For Agamben, bare life is inevitably linked with "the state of exception"—that is, the state of being both excluded from and captured within the political order of the community (9). Jews in Nazi concentration camps, refugees, and stateless persons are among Agamben's major examples of bare life: they are not qualified to be members of the "perfect community" and therefore "may be killed without the commission of homicide" (159).

Whereas Agamben's analysis of bare life is meant to reveal that mechanism of politics, or biopolitics in particular, which has caused the victimization of certain human populations throughout history, scholars such as Dominick LaCapra and Cary Wolfe apply this same model to animals. Wolfe, following LaCapra, criticizes Agamben for not recognizing that animals in certain circumstances are "bare or naked, unprotected life" (27)—although pet animals in the US are receiving "unprecedented levels of care" as he also acknowledges—and proposes that we need to make "a distinction between *bios* and *zoe* . . . within the domain of domesticated animals itself" (53, 55; ellipsis added). In other words, domesticated animals should be divided into "bare life," or *zoe*, and "qualified life," or *bios*, according to the different ways in which they are treated by their owners and by others. This proposal may be reasonable, of course, but again for Agamben the borderline between bare life and qualified life is not fixed, so that the transition from one to the other in either direction may happen at any time. Indeed, for Agamben bare life is "a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture" (109), and this idea

may help to illuminate the following discussion of how dogs can experience rapid and unexpected changes, positive or negative, in status and circumstances.

In China as well as in most countries in the world, dog-owners, especially those in cities, are required to get a dog license to legally own the dog. For the dog, a license is vital in the sense that it gives the animal a sort of identity as the private property of the owner, which means it is then protected by law against any possible harm originating outside its home. Thus a dog with a license is supposed to be a qualified life rather than a bare life, as it cannot be maltreated or killed at will. The 2003 movie *Cala, My Dog* focuses on a series of events generated by this dog-license issue and thus reveals its complexity. Released in 2003, the movie is set in Beijing in 1995, the year the first dog-keeping law was implemented. At this time the growing canine population was increasingly seen to be competing for living space with the growing human population.

The movie shows the effect of the law on a common working-class family, which worries about losing its little mongrel Cala because they cannot afford the five thousand *yuan* fee to get it registered—which is as much as the family can save in two to three years. Cala is fortunate, for its owner Lao Er is willing to pay for its license, and thus succeeds in ransoming it out of a dog pound where it will be killed. But as can be seen in the movie, many other dogs who lack the protection of a dog license are less fortunate. They are actually living in a space of dangerous uncertainty, or what Agamben describes as “a zone of indistinction,” between a qualified life and a bare life. Once they drop into the latter state because of being deserted or stolen, all that awaits them is either death or the suffering life of a stray dog. But is it certain that dogs with both a home and a license are really exempt from the fate of living a bare life? As we shall see, it is not.

That a pet dog’s life in the city could be filled with danger is made clear in the novelette “Peace Dog” by Chen Yingsong. Once a hunting dog and guard dog living in the mountains, Peace was brought to the big city of Wuhan by chance and suffered a series of misfortunes. It is through this country dog’s experiences in the city that we get a glimpse of what an animal’s bare life would be like in a totally human-dominated environment, one that is hostile to anything seen by the cultured urbanites as being wild, dirty, and unworthy. But the irony here is that the supposedly civilized city is also the site of bloody dog markets, where captured stray dogs and stolen dogs end up as fresh ingredients in delicious “dog-meat hotpots” (Chen 24). The narrator’s remark that “Dog meat is nothing but a dish, a seasonal dish, which is clear to everybody except dogs” is a sarcastic comment on the totally self-centered eating habits of some Chinese, and a sympathetic description of the totally unprotected life-

situation faced by the majority of dogs in China (Chen 24).

Peace's observation that some of the dogs in the butcher's cages "were once taken extremely good care of by their owners and had lived a luxurious life" tells us that the fortune of pet dogs is far from ever being secure (Chen 26). The unpredictable fate of treasured pets who become mere heaps of dog meat is shown in this novelette to be an all too common fate for most, if not all, dogs in China, whether they live in the city or the countryside, or whether or not they have a license. The truth is, dogs are totally at the mercy of human power—and this is just as true in the private sphere, that is, in the space shared by a pet and its owner, as it is in the public sphere. The fact that there is no law that protects domestic animals in China means that the owners can do whatever they want with their private property without receiving any form of punishment. Therefore, in "Peace Dog" we see Peace's owner, Dazhong, taking full advantage of his right—as the owner—to beat his dog mercilessly and then sell it to the butcher in the dog market. So legally speaking, dogs in China are forms or examples of bare life in the private sphere, a space in which they have no protection at all from the negligence or violence of their owners.

In the novelette, Dazhong's abuse of Peace is explained as the result of the evil influence of the city. As a matter of fact, the city is presented here as a life-destroying hell and as such is contrasted sharply with the innocent countryside. Much of this contrast is observed from Peace's point of view, for he often remembers the good old days hunting with his owner in the mountains or huddling together with other animals in the big family room around a glowing stove during the long, leisurely winter. It is these happy memories that eventually drive Peace to take a long journey back to his home village. "Peace Dog" then presents the long-standing opposition between city and country, or between nature and culture, which may exist more in our imagination than in reality. That is to say, the vast rural areas in China are far from being the kind of canine paradise that still lives in Peace's memory.

Another novelette by Chen entitled "Rabies," and a short story by Zhang Wei entitled "Defense in a Dream," focus on one of the major threats for country dogs: rabies. Chen's "Rabies" opens with two short sentences which convey a clear sense of horror: "Mad dogs are approaching the village. Two" (Chen 383). As the story goes on, readers come to see why rabies horrifies the villagers. It is not only because it kills whoever or whatever is infected, but also because people have no means of protection against it. A vaccination would cost more than one hundred *yuan*, which is simply too much for the destitute villagers to afford, and so those who are bitten by the rabid animals can do nothing but wait to die.

One may say that the impoverished life of these villagers has plunged them into

a state that is no better than that of the dogs and cattle they keep. But they are better, or at least better off, than the animals after all, because whereas all the infected animals in the village must be killed, humans cannot be: “One has to pay with one’s life for killing another person” is what the chief of the village tells the father who wants to shoot his mad daughter (Chen, “Rabies” 421). But this important rule, which everybody has to obey, does not apply to animals. The “dog-killing order” makes it clear that all unregistered dogs, the registered but free-roaming dogs, and the dogs that are suspected of being rabid are going to be “wiped out” by the local militia (404). Obviously, no one would expect the militia themselves to pay for all this killing. It is as if all the village dogs have been cursed by this order, which transforms them instantly into living embodiments of bare life.

The implications of being a representative or embodiment of bare life in rural China are most explicitly brought out in the story “Defense in a Dream,” where we come to know that dog-killing has become a repeatable, evil cycle in the little town of the story. Whenever a new cycle begins due to some individual cases of rabies, all the dogs of the town, including the registered ones, have to be killed. The first-person narrator of the story is so furious about this mass wanton killing, done in the name of the communal or collective interest, that he calls it “a massacre” (W. Zhang 205). A real-life version of these fictional canine massacres took place in 2009 in the suburban counties of Hanzhong city in Northwestern China, where more than twenty thousand dogs were clubbed to death within one week in Yangxian County.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, country dogs in China have always been a form of bare life. The dog-killing order simply changes a suspended death sentence into one that goes into effect immediately. But especially since the advent of the new century, dogs have also been increasingly affected by the demands of city-dwelling consumers. Many documentaries produced since 2010 have reported on the controversial Yulin Dog-Meat Festival held in Yulin, the second-largest city in Guangxi province in Southern China. According to these reports, more than ten thousand dogs are killed and consumed in one single day at the time of the Summer Solstice, which the Festival apparently celebrates. In such documentaries we also see many protestors at the site of the Festival; they are fiercely arguing with those who are hungry for their dog-meat meal, and sometimes fighting breaks out. The protestors contend that since dogs are the best friend of human beings, it is an immoral act of betrayal to eat them. Defenders of the festival, however, insist that dog meat has been a traditional local food for many years, just as other animals have long been a source of food for humans,

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<sup>4</sup> See *Hanzhong Dog-Killing Incident*.

and that it is their right to preserve their own local culture.

Eventually, as neither side seems able to finally win this moral-cultural debate, protestors can only use food safety as a legitimate reason to accuse the dog-meat dealers, and to persuade diners to give up eating dog meat.<sup>5</sup> In fact, most of the dogs in the dog-meat market have not been raised as food animals, as dog-meat traders always claim. Instead, they were the close companions of humans before being stolen from their homes, more often in the countryside, and some were poisoned before they were kidnapped. Indeed, a dark chain of businesses has actually been formed, one which includes stealing the dogs, transporting them, and finally butchering them. But with no law to protect these innocent animals as a “legitimate” form of life, such crimes, and such criminals, cannot be punished. It has been estimated that over ten million dogs are being consumed in China each year (“From Foreign”). One can hardly begin to comprehend the horror of such a mass extermination, one undertaken simply for the gratification of the Chinese palate.

In discussing *San Hua*, a documentary about feral cats and what they have suffered as providers of fur and meat, Chang Chia-ju has pointed out that the beautiful Chinese philosophy of the “Oneness of Heaven and Man” is contradicted by the actual indifference to animal suffering in Chinese society, especially when it comes to eating. Chang speaks of the “cruel gastro-aesthetics of the Chinese,” arguing that when moral considerations about animal rights are replaced by a mere aesthetics of food that totally ignores animal torture, then flesh-and-blood animals are turned into commodities, into something even worse than bare life (*Global* 135). Chang observes that cruelty to animals has long been an element of Chinese culinary practice.<sup>6</sup> This also means, of course, that in China animals have long been granted a minimal status as embodiments of bare life.

It is no doubt true that, when it comes to eating dog meat, the butchering stage has always been very cruel. However, the enormous amount of cruelty and violence involved in the earlier stages, for example, in the act of stealing dogs from their (human) homes, has only more recently become clear. But arguably the most shocking thing of all is the way in which the practice of dog-meat eating has evolved from a small-scale, local, seasonal custom into a huge industry. The Yulin Dog-Meat Festival only became a so-called “festival”—thereby attracting ravenous dog-meat eaters from all over the country—in the last ten years or so. Before then, the local

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<sup>5</sup> There are a number of documentaries about Yulin Dog-Meat Festivals, of which *Yulin Dog-Meat Festival, a Crime at a Bite?* is the earliest and the most influential one at the time.

<sup>6</sup> In a subsequent article, Chang partly modifies her view and argues that “‘cruel gastronomic aesthetics’ is not unique to Chinese culture” (“Animal” 527).

people only ate dog meat at home. This practice itself was only picked up from the suburban rural areas when the city of Yulin began to expand in the 1990s (Zhang, Yurong et al. 66-69). The fact that unprecedented levels of dog-meat consumption have been achieved largely through the promotion of recently-created dog-meat festivals, held usually in cities of various sizes, provides a Chinese example of “the deadly anthropogenic potential of the modern city” in the form of “the gravitational pull of urban consumption” (Daly 162, 148).

### **Humans and Dogs in the Inter-species or Multispecies Chain**

Donna Haraway refers to the inter-species love between humans and canines as “a natural cultural legacy” (*Companion Species* 3). The mutual influence the two species have had on each other over the long course of human civilization is not only accomplished through acts of communication and affection but also through acts of dominance and abuse, though the latter are committed for the most part by humans. Haraway obviously sees humans and their companion species, including dogs and cats, as being all bound up in “a knot of species co-shaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity” (*When* 42), or in what she calls the “multispecies chain” (*When* 49). By mentioning “reciprocating complexity,” she most likely refers to the “asymmetrical living and dying and nurturing and killing,” or to the serious inequality amid interdependence of and between species (*When* 42).

With reference to Haraway’s idea of “reciprocating complexity,” then, I will examine in this section the influence of Chinese modernization and urbanization on various inequalities that exist, not only as inter-species facts but also as intra-species vices. And since this article is mainly concerned with human-canine relations, I will use the term “inter-species chain” together with Haraway’s term “multispecies chain.” The examination of dogs as representatives of bare life in selected Chinese dog narratives in the previous section showed how the denial of the basic right to life of the majority of dogs in Chinese society affects them. Here my questions include: how do the situations and conditions of dogs relate to or interact with those of people? And how does the dogs’ status as embodying bare life affect people, including their owners and their victimizers? By looking further into the dog issue, we may eventually be able to clarify the workings of the multispecies or inter-species chain that links nature with culture, human rights with animal rights, and social and political conflicts with ethical and economic dilemmas.

The literary and cinematic texts that are being examined in this paper are usually described as “subaltern literature” or “narratives of suffering” (苦難敘事

*kunan xushi*), a genre which began to emerge in the late 1980s. But rather than exposing human problems only, the narratives of suffering we are looking at here present the interconnected experiences of pain, suffering, and helplessness of both the humans and the dogs who somehow have ended up at the lowest levels of society. For example, the movie *Cala, My Dog* refers to the different economic classes or statuses of Lao Er and his old sweetheart, now a small business owner, through our perception of the dissimilar status of their dogs: one is a mongrel with no dog license and the other a thoroughbred with a license. In other words, when social stratification in urban China due to economic reforms began to take shape, this kind of thinking affected humans and dogs alike.<sup>7</sup>

The novelette “Peace Dog” then manifests on a wider scale the connection between various forms of social inequality, most of which only appeared with the advent of Chinese economic reforms. The excuse Dazhong offers—one “becomes hard-hearted once away from home, like a serpent”—for having abused and deserted his dog, sounds just as absurd as Peace’s realization that he found himself turning into “a wild beast” after coming to the city (Chen 3, 26). Rather than being a place of promise, potentially a *topos* that may become civilized, the city is found to be a breeding ground for vice and crime that often find the powerless, for instance peasant workers like Dazhong and homeless dogs like Peace, to be easy targets. The fact that Dazhong ends his life in an illegal toxic chemical plant on the edge of the city, where he has been held in captivity and forced to labor, tells us that bare life exists even in the heart of civilization and that the term applies to both dogs and humans.

As my analysis of “Peace Dog” shows, the fact that dogs are forms of bare life has the same implications for all dog-owners, whether they are rich or poor, as long as they regard their dog as nothing more than a possession which they can choose to indulge or abuse at will. But the dog-owners who truly care about and have a very deep feeling for their companion dogs will find themselves in a very painful situation if they have neither the money nor the power to protect their canine friends. This is precisely the situation that one of the villagers, Tang Liufu, is facing in “Rabies.” He refuses to give up his rabid dog Heizi who once saved his life, and is determined to save the dog’s life at the risk of his own. His simple belief in the fairness of “a life for a life” is a direct rejection of the official view of dogs as worthless vermin that must be exterminated for the benefit of the human community (Chen 422).

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<sup>7</sup> Chinese economic reforms formally began in 1978 in certain restricted areas and have gone through several stages ever since. The period between 1984 and 1992 is the so-called “overall exploration period.” Economic restructuring began during the period between 1992 and 2000 (see Song and Gao).

The narrator of “Defense in a Dream” is also trying to protest the government’s dog-killing order, which he regards as a violation of both the Chinese Constitution and the emotional bond between people and their faithful companions. The narrator even connects cruelty toward dogs with the inclination to be violent toward humans, and associates the slaughter of dogs with the killing of any living thing, even a plant. In this narrative, the negative effect of repetitive dog-killing on both individual humans and human society gives rise to the narrator’s clear vision of the multispecies chain. Yet despite his eloquent and forceful protest, which turns out to be a futile defense as he made it in his dream, his dog is found dead in his own yard, killed by somebody who doesn’t even bother to notify the narrator—the dog’s legal owner—before taking the dog’s life. In fact, the “dog issue” in both this story and “Rabies” points to related problems in contemporary rural China; these include mass poverty, destruction of the environment, an unsound legal system, and the oppressive rule of government officials. “Defense in a Dream” also makes clear that the country is in no way better than the city in terms of both its natural and its social environment. Indeed, in terms of economic and administrative issues, the country is far worse than the city, which at least partly explains the frequent occurrence of mass dog-killings and other unscrupulous crimes against dogs in the countryside.

“Defense in a Dream” shows how a person’s love for his dog is unable to counteract the cold killing machine that is operated in the name of public security and health. The dog and its owner, a retired school teacher living a very simple life in a small town, may seem to be embodiments of bare life. We might think that a dog-owner’s love of, and sense of responsibility for, his or her dog might be enough to save the animal’s life, and yet this loving and feeling responsible for one’s own dog, something shared by countless dog-owners, does not give legal protection to the dogs. Indeed, the Chinese dog narratives tell us that whether or not this love for the animal will be sufficient for saving its life really depends on the dog owner’s economic and social status as well as on his or her identity as a city- or a country-dweller. Yet it seems that such rampant social and biological inequality can hardly be explained via the concept of “the Anthropocene.” Indeed, Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp have argued against this term’s apparent presupposition that “human beings” comprise one single and entire species, despite the differences in humans’ gender, age, class, race, and other factors that might well lead to or make a different impact on nature. Although Tønnessen, Oma, and Rattasepp raise the issue in the Western context, it is still relevant to the Chinese situation discussed here.

A dog as a form of bare life will be vulnerable to terrible acts of torture and murder on the part of those who take delight in torturing and killing dogs and, more

often than not, also to those who try to make a profit out of the dog business. Guo Peng, a Chinese sociologist who has spent years investigating the Chinese dog-meat industry, discovered that this whole industry actually depends on the criminal act of stealing dogs, mainly large guard dogs from the countryside. In his reports, he cites examples of criminal gangs who take dogs away by force right in front of their owners, threaten witnesses and, in places where there are no other dogs to sound a warning, also break into households to steal other animals such as goats and cows (Guo). One can easily imagine the serious social problems and conflicts these actions are likely to cause.

In fact, in the last five years or so, there have been many news reports in both written and visual form about the fierce conflicts between villagers and dog-stealing gangsters, conflicts which often ended in the deaths or injuries mainly of the villagers.<sup>8</sup> In one case, three men killed a taxi-driver simply to get his car in order to transport stolen dogs. For these criminals, driven by their craze for money, it seems that neither the value of human life nor that of animal life is equal to the value of money itself. Yet one senses a strange egalitarianism here inasmuch as animals and humans are apparently placed on the same level, if not thus identified. For the butcher in “Peace Dog” treats all dogs the same regardless of their breed and market value, because after all they are “all a chunk of meat” (Chen 16). The butcher’s attitude toward dogs, then, suggests a lack of any moral consciousness of good and evil, not to mention a feeling of affinity for non-human animals. The diminishing influence of the traditional moral values of animal-friendly religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism might also need to be set in this context.

This butcher’s attitude is common among those participating in “the chain” of the dog-meat business, from the thieves at one end, to the consumers at the other. It is also against this attitude that the animal protection activists fight, those involved in highway-dog rescues and dog-meat festival protests. Fundamentally it may seem that here we have the arrogance of the strong towards the weak, an attitude which originates, as the narrator in “Defense in a Dream” believes, in “the evil corrupted part of human nature,” which may result in the irrational, unrestrained destruction of life (W. Zhang 199). Here then we need to remember what Wolfe says, following the lead of Gayatri Spivak: “If we allow the human/animal distinction to remain intact . . . then the machinery of speciesism and animalization will be available to use against various subjugated groups, animal *or* human” (qtd. in Cole 102; ellipsis added; emphasis in original).

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<sup>8</sup> There were at least 224 reports about the deaths or injuries of villagers caused by the dog-stealing gangs in the single year of 2012 (Guo).

## Chinese Dog Narratives as an Anti-Myth of Modernity

The inter-species chain linking humans and dogs which we are looking at here has always existed, but what has turned it into an evil chain full of blood and tears, madness and despair is something, or rather two things, that have appeared rather recently in Chinese society: modernization and urbanization. Modernization is a global phenomenon initiated by the Industrial Revolution, which began in England with the rise of factories in the eighteenth century and was increasingly spreading to developing countries after World War II. Modernization has also led to the beginning of the Anthropocene, “a new geological epoch or era” according to some scholars (Steffen et al. 842). Modernization emerged in China when the country began to open its doors to the West and to Western influence in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet it is generally believed that modernization did not really begin to take hold in China until the 1980s, when a series of important policies concerning economic, political, and social reforms were established by the central government between 1978 and 1985.<sup>9</sup>

Closely related to economic and social modernization, urbanization quickly followed. Beginning from the 1990s there was large-scale migration of the rural population into cities, and a significant and continuing drop in the number of rural residents.<sup>10</sup> As earlier in the West, Chinese modernization and urbanization did not always have their desired effects. There was a widening gap between the fast-growing cities and the virtually-forgotten countryside, and also an increasing gap between the income of the richest and poorest urbanites. As for the latter, we also saw an ever-larger group made up of the urban poor, the so-called “bottom class” that included migrant peasant workers increasingly beset with serious social, economic, and psychological problems. Here then we come back to the issue of killing dogs in order to sell their meat, and to other aspects of the Chinese “dog problem” discussed at length above.

The movie *Cala, My Dog* presents urban pets as both a result of modernization and a remedy to the maladies that come with it. In “Why Look at Animals?,” John Berger looks at the gradual but steady disappearance of animals in modern Western cities from the nineteenth century to the present, and the consequent rise in the

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<sup>9</sup> A generally-accepted view of the process of Chinese modernization takes the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party, held in 1978, as a seminal event marking the real beginning of Chinese modernization.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics show a large and rapid rise in the urban population since 1978, from 17.92% in 1978 to 45.68% in 2008 (Y. Wang). More recent and unofficial statistics show that the Chinese rural population has dropped to less than half since 2011 (Tong and Wu).

number of urban zoos and children's toys that are made to incorporate or look like animals. Berger claims that practices such as pet-keeping became increasingly popular due to "the alienation of modern citizens from a working engagement with nature," for indeed these practices reflect "the isolation of urban dwellers" (1). Yi-fu Tuan agrees that we may see our increasingly sentimentalized view of domestic animals as being the result of "the growing distance between people and nature" in modern Western society (112).

Although the practice of keeping urban pets appeared much later in Chinese society than in the West, it also seems to have arisen from a drastic change in human-nature relations beginning from the launch of "the state-sponsored modernization campaign" in the 1980s (Lu 2). But this more general change can only partly explain the Chinese pet phenomenon, and yet as far as *Cala, My Dog* is concerned, such a change best exemplifies what Erica Fudge said about dog stories: they tell of "a [human] desire for completion—for self-knowledge, self-possession, security and stability" (37). It is exactly this kind of desire that we see in Lao Er when he admits that "it is only before Cala that I feel like a man." Yet it is clear that Lao Er's determination to protect his dog comes as much from his concern for the animal as it does from his almost desperate need to maintain a sense of authority in his family, and a sense of self-respect before others in an era that did not promise security and stability to a common urban laborer like him.

The story of Lao Er and Cala supports Berger's view that the pet "completes" its owner (25). Other stories offer examples of such a completion in different ways. One episode in "Peace Dog" tells of a middle-aged, laid-off worker, once an "educated youth" during the Cultural Revolution, who wanted to live in the high mountains where he had grown up and also where Peace, his dog, came from. The movie *Postmen in the Mountains* is often viewed as a countryside version of *Cala, My Dog*. It shows how the deep emotional bond between a retired country postman and his old dog helps the man, and later his son, to maintain a precious sense of inner peace in an age when traditional, rural ways of life, even in those remote mountain areas, cannot escape the effects of urbanization.

In the last two stories, the dog's close association with a peaceful and harmonious country life makes it an effective psychological weapon in the battle against the threat of modernization, where the latter is a force that pushes people further and further away from nature—both inner (human) nature and outer (wild) nature. In fact, this psychological need for animal companionship is hardly a new or modern invention. When Berger speaks of "the loneliness of man as a species" and of our need for a connection with non-human animals, he suggests that the human

desire for the companionship of animals has been a deep-seated psychological need from the days of the earliest human communities on the planet. This is because, through our “passage from nature to culture,” animals have always acted as “an *intercession* between man and his origin [in nature]” (15; emphasis in original). In other words, animals such as dogs answer a double need of human psychology inasmuch as they represent both (our) outer and inner nature. And although the term “the Anthropocene” mainly emphasizes man’s influence on external nature—as in our increasingly negative impact on the environment—in fact we have always “worked on” and developed our own inner nature (as our sophisticated hominid brains continued to develop), as well as tried to modify and improve the outside natural world in which we live.

However, having acknowledged the natural bond between humans and their companion animals, a bond which has to some degree been intensified by modernization, how can we explain all the violence against animals, the torture of animals that we have seen in Chinese dog narratives set in an age which is supposed to be guided by the principle of rationality? The answer, I think, lies in our modern faith in pure reason, which to me is also the hidden power of the Anthropocene. Some Chinese scholars regard pure reason, or abstract rationality, as an important cause of “the predicament of Chinese modernization” (Z. Wang 6). As far as the Chinese dog issue is concerned, pure reason manifests itself in two major forms: institutional regulative powers and a money-oriented utilitarianism. Most of the literary and cinematic texts discussed so far show the sporadic working of institutional powers, often in response to emergencies either in the form of new dog-keeping regulations or cases of rabies.

Rather than exploring the mechanism of these powers, these texts tend to focus more on the ways in which institutional powers harm and even destroy humans and their companion dogs, with a particular emphasis on the emotional devastation suffered by the dog-owners. “Defense in a Dream” stands out as it presents us with the most direct attack on that terrible “inhumanity”—one that humans are all too capable of—which allows for the total denial of the value of animal life and the total disregard of human feelings. Moreover, as we see in the story “Rabies,” what is hidden behind the dog-killing practices (movements, rampages) and other social conflicts is a distortion of human nature brought about by a government’s attempts to regularize nature, even to regularize or control the principle of pure reason. Thus when the character Zhao Zijie in “Rabies” reflects on his eighteen-year career as chief of the village, he realizes that what he lost in helping the government to put the village in “perfect order” was something truly valuable: “a deep-rooted life grown out of a

warm and close interpersonal relationship and a spontaneous kindness towards others” (Chen, “Rabies” 437). He also realizes that the official explanations he gave to the villagers were “reasons from outside,” which could only create a distance between himself and the others (438).

While Chief Zhao’s epiphany reveals to him that pure reason may be both domineering and dehumanizing, documentaries focusing on the dog-meat industry expose its extreme utilitarianism, its ability to make a few people—the “insiders” or those already “at the top”—rich very quickly, with no concern with ethics or with (at least some) existing laws. The point is that what we really see in people’s blind pursuit of money is the distortion of human nature. The Capital Society for Animal Protection uploaded on its official blog several photos from the 2016 Yulin Dog-Meat Festival and described the opening day of the festival, June 21, as “a day of national shame produced by the market-economy.”<sup>11</sup>

The detrimental role of the market economy in misguiding people, perhaps by warping or distorting their naturally positive or empathy-based judgments, becomes obvious in the description of the festival. What is less obvious is that not only individuals are being misled but also institutions of various kinds and at several levels. The fact that the Yulin Dog-Meat Festival was once publicly promoted under the pretext of being a cultural tradition tells us that the festival was tacitly, if not openly, supported by the local government. Dogs thus become doubly victimized in this utilitarian society, both as insignificant forms or manifestations of bare life and as mere objects with which those in power can make quick and easy money.

Research has also shown that dogs may also be the victims of other vast, abstract powers that are beyond the control of any individuals. Guo links urbanization and the resultant decrease in the number of rural residents with the deteriorating security in rural areas, where the latter may be both a cause and an effect of widespread looting and dog-stealing in the countryside. Chang attributes “the creation of dog-meat and dog fur festivals” in recent years to the influence of “urbanization and the global sprawl of the Western red-meat culture” (“Animal” 533). Though I have doubts about the extent of the influence of the so-called “Western red-meat culture” in China, I admit that a certain degree of Western influence, of course, does exist, and that it has been an important driving force behind Chinese modernization and urbanization in general, and behind the pet industry in particular. What is definitely not a result of Western influence, however, is the consumption of the meat of companion dogs.

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<sup>11</sup> The mentioned photos and quoted expression are available on the miniblog of the Capital Society for Animal Protection, dated June 20, 2016 (“Survey”).

The famous Chinese movie director Jia Zhangke produced a very short documentary entitled *The Condition of Dogs* in 2001. For five minutes of the film, the camera mostly focuses on a puppy's head popping out of a hole in a big sack, which holds several other puppies as well, and it is clear that all of them are about to be sold, abandoned to a still-unknown destiny. The use of long takes effectively brings out the sense of helplessness that one observes in the puppy's vague look and also understands as the all-too-real and general condition of dogs in today's China. Jedediah Purdy, speaking of the Anthropocene, observes with irony that "the more we understand and the more our power increases, the more our control over nature seems a precarious fantasy" (7).

It is through dog tales, the ones discussed above and many others not included here, that we try to make sense of today's Chinese society, and to examine its failings with regard to human-canine relations. We may also see the (lack of) human dog connections as a reflection of human-nature relations in the ever-expanding modernization and urbanization of China. Perhaps we, the Chinese who already feel drowning in the torrents of modernization, must avoid being carried away by the dangerous undercurrents. We must keep remembering that nature does matter, and that it deserves to be respected in its manifestation—natural beings, plants and animals, and the natural instincts of humans.

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### About the Author

Chen Hong is a Professor of English in the Research Center for Comparative Literature and World Literatures at Shanghai Normal University, where she specializes in English poetry

since the Romantic period. Her research interest also includes contemporary Chinese environmental literature, particularly animal literature. She published in English her PhD thesis on the role of animals in the poetry of Ted Hughes and D. H. Lawrence as *Bestiality, Animality, and Humanity* (2005). She is also the author of three book chapters and a number of journal articles on animal literature in both English and Chinese.

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