

## Animal husbandry and food production in China and Europe: a shared moral problem?

F.L.B. Meijboom<sup>1\*</sup> and J. Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Ethics Institute, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13a, 3512 BL Utrecht, the Netherlands;* <sup>2</sup>*Department of Science, Technology and Governance, China Agriculture University, 17 Qinghua Donglu, Beijing 100083, China P.R.;* [f.l.b.meijboom@uu.nl](mailto:f.l.b.meijboom@uu.nl); [lijianjun@cau.edu.cn](mailto:lijianjun@cau.edu.cn)

### Abstract

In China and Europe many millions of animals are used for food production. For both regions animal food production is considered to be important for both the internal market, but also for export. In spite of these similarities there are many differences. First, while in Europe there currently is a lot of public attention to animal welfare, the moral value of animals and discussions on animal rights, the discussion on these topics in China seems to be relatively limited. This difference is remarkable and cannot only be explained by the fact that food security and food safety rather than food quality are in China more on the public agenda than in Europe. Traditionally, China has a much stronger philosophical tradition with regard to the human-animal relationship than the Western tradition. Nonetheless, current advocates of animal welfare or animal rights in China refer to modern Western philosophers rather than to the Chinese tradition. At the same time, recent discussions in Europe on animal ethics show that the proposals from the last century (e.g. Singer, 1995; Regan, 2004) still raise many theoretical and practical questions. This suggests that the East and the West can genuinely learn from each other in the case of the ethical evaluation of animal husbandry. In our paper we explore the Chinese traditions and the current animal welfare discussions in China. Next we draft ideas about how these traditions can serve as input for the debate on animal welfare in China and Europe.

**Keywords:** animal welfare, food production, China

### Introduction

In China and Europe many millions of animals are used for food production. For both regions animal food production is considered to be important for both the internal market, but also for export. In spite of these similarities there are many differences. First, while in Europe there currently is a lot of public attention to animal welfare, the moral value of animals and discussions on animal rights, the discussion on these topics in China seems to be relatively limited. This difference is remarkable given the philosophical and moral tradition of reflections on animals in a very long history of Chinese civilization.

Although explicit references to animal rights or animal welfare in Chinese classical literature are rare, benevolence to animals or respect for animal life based on either human morality or the intrinsic value of nature can be recognized in the Chinese culture. Nonetheless, current advocates of animal welfare or animal rights in China refer to modern Western philosophers rather than to the Chinese tradition. That is to be regret for two reasons. First, it seems to disregard the precious spiritual heritage of China. This lack of attention for its own heritage, can be considered as trend in China and as a consequence of the pursue of survival and striving for economic power during the last 200 years. Second, recent discussions in Western philosophy-oriented animal ethics show that the proposals from the last century (e.g. Singer, 1995; Regan, 2004) still raise many theoretical and practical questions. This suggests that the East and the West can genuinely learn from each other in the case of the debate on animal ethics. In this paper, we first explore the Chinese discussion on animal welfare. Next, we shortly introduce the Confucian

and Daoist views on the human-animal relationship. Finally, we discuss how these traditions can serve as input for the discussion on animal welfare in the context of food production.

## Current changes in the Chinese debate on animals

Recently animal welfare has become part of public discussion in China. This is reflected in many references to animal use and animal cruelty on social media and by a number of public activities that have been organized in China. These activities aim to protest against many kinds of cruelty and animal welfare problems in China, ranging from fur farming to food production. These activities critically discuss whether (increasing) human welfare should come at the cost of reduced animal welfare. Activities have, for instance been focused on the protection of the welfare of the bears that are used by the Guizhentang Pharmaceutical company that keeps bears in order to extract bile for Chinese medicine. Also the Yulin Dog Meat Festival in Guangxi province of south-west China has been a target of fierce debates. These activities are partly inspired and initiated by international NGO's such as the Humane Society, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). However, also Chinese animal rights and welfare organizations play a central role. In the theoretical discussions on the arguments that underlie the attention to animal welfare one often refers to Western philosophy, especially Peter Singer's thoughts that were translated in Chinese in the 1990's. However, currently some Chinese philosophers and ethicists attempt to construct a new animal ethics that uses (elements of) Confucian animal ethics, Taoism ethics and Buddhism ethics.

## Different terms, but same concepts?

Animal welfare has been a central concept in European discussion on animal policy, animal protection and ethics for many decades. Animal welfare is recognized by the European Member States as an important aspect that should be acknowledged in all kinds of activities including agriculture, research and technological development (Lisbon Treaty, 2009). Also the new European Directive on animal research stresses the importance of taking the interests of animals into consideration (Directive 2010/63/EU, art. 12). Likewise the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) takes this development seriously and recently published its revised Code of Conduct and the Veterinary Act that explicitly includes ethical guidelines with respect to the health and welfare of animals (FVE, 2012). If we search for similar activities in the mainland of China, it seems that there are only small and limited steps to address questions of animal welfare (cf. Li, 2009). Even if one looks in the Chinese tradition, the term animal welfare cannot easily be recognized and the common Western distinction between animal welfare and animal rights is difficult to understand from a Chinese perspective (Lu *et al.*, 2013).

Nonetheless, it would be a too easy conclusion that Chinese tradition would lack thoughts on the position of animals and on our duties with regard to animals. Even though the term animal welfare lacks in Chinese literature, there are concepts that are or can be related to doing well towards animals. For instance, in Confucian ethics 'benevolence' ('Ren') is a central concept (Shen, 2014). This notion of 'Ren' implies that a man should care for his family members, his friends and other people. However, this care or love is not limited to humans. It should extend to everything on earth, which explicitly leaves room for care for animals. Confucians defend that everything on earth, including humans, animals, and society is part of a holistic system. This system of life and life creation includes the universal law ('Tao') (Shen, 2014). When participating in the life-creating-process of the holistic system, humans recognize this universal law. Once man recognizes this, then humanity will be his inherent nature and consequently benevolence will be his virtue. Therefore, 'benevolence' with respect to animals is more than an imperative that links to human interests only. We can have moral duties towards animals. At the same time, the source of normativity of this duty lies in the general requirements for self-improvement and the improvement of society of every man that is a central imperative in Confucian ethics. Therefore,

### Section 3

we conclude that Confucian ethics can take animal interests seriously for its own sake, but always starts in human morality or moral needs. In general Confucians define the human in contrast to the animal (Roetz, 2010). In justifying the attitude of benevolence towards animals one does not need not to refer to notions of animal right or animal dignity, it rather requires a reference to the ideal human behaviour that is in harmony with nature, including the element of time. In this sense the tradition has been human centred (Cao, 2011; Roetz, 2010). However, even if we grant this, it is important to notice that in spite of this tradition its distinction between humans and animals provides room to go beyond a 'human interest only' account.

Next to Confucianism, 'Taoism' (or 'Daoism') is another important philosophical tradition in China. In Taoism nature is perceived as a well-ordered chaos that exists of many entities of equal importance and value (Roetz, 2010: 206). Taoist ethics focuses on the understanding of this reality of nature. This includes notions of increasing longevity, living morally, and building consciousness and attention one's diet. The content and interpretation of Taoists ethics can vary between the different schools, but in general it tends to emphasize four aspects: wu-wei (action through non-action), naturalness, simplicity, and spontaneity. Especially, Zhuangzi's perspective on naturalness of animals opens the normative possibility to address the value of animals for their own sake. From this the imperative follows to respect animals' naturalness, which encompasses the notions of animal integrity and autonomy. Zhuangzi argues that humans 'do not overcome what is of nature by what is of man' (Fall water of Zhuangzi), which implies that any loss of nature including the change or use of animals is to be evaluated negatively. Zhuangzi stressed the importance of freedom and autonomy for animal flourishing by a series of metaphorical stories, and he criticized the human tendency to distort the natural state of animals or their own innate nature (*xing*) and inner power (*de*) through domestication and instrumentalism. Zhuangzi also expressed his ideas on integrity and the inherent value of animals which should be respected by humans. In the Zhuangzi, we also find a discussion of the ritual practices and the recognition of animals as both independent agents and manifestations of the sacred, which entails that animals have their inherent value of life. This also emphasizes that humans are not allowed to violate or interfere with the life of animals. According to Zhuangzi's statement, humans should not distort their own innate nature, their own connection with the Dao, by interfering with the freedom and self-unfolding of animals.

From this short presentation of the Daoist tradition it follows that this tradition provides a clear basis to take the welfare of animals in to account and to formulate direct duties towards animals. It even provides the ground for an even more critical stance towards animal use in general.

### Tradition in practice

The above presentation of the Chinese traditions is no more than a first step and it is beyond the scope of this paper to present and evaluate these traditions at full length. Nonetheless, it shows that the Chinese tradition has a potential to contribute to the discussions on animal welfare and animal ethics in general.

First, it shows for the Chinese debate it is possible to evaluate practices of animal use from an ethical perspective without reference to Western philosophy. This is important, because it shows that respect for animals and animal welfare are more than 'import products', but are considerations that fit in the Chinese philosophical traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. This may help in the process of creating more official support for the position of animals in food production.

Second, these traditions have the potential to improve the quality of the debate in China. As mentioned before the Western distinctions between rights and welfare do not have direct equivalents in the Chinese language and tradition. Furthermore, the Cartesian distinction between man, animal and nature that often form the background for Westerners discussions on the position of animals does not have direct links

with the Confucian and Daoist perspectives. As a result the current discussion in China runs the risk of using concepts, terms and distinction that may not (yet) really be incorporated in the Chinese society. On the other hand, the debate may be frustrated by the fact that one appears to discuss animal welfare in univocal terms, while actually there are fundamental differences that underlie the used concepts and terms, but remain implicit. Especially with respect to animal welfare this is a serious risk. Already the European discussions on animal welfare show a huge variety of definitions and interpretations of the concept of welfare (cf. Haynes, 2011). In China this problem is multiplied by the cultural differences between China and the West. By elaborating on the traditional Chinese perspectives it is possible to clarify the (potential) differences and to explore the possibilities to find common ground for discussion.

Third, the Chinese traditions can serve as an incentive to reflect on the Western debates on animal ethics. For instance, the idea of a unity of humans and heaven (including the earth) and the relation between humans and animals as a continuum may not be absent in the Western tradition, but is not mainstream and challenges views that start from a strict(er) segregation between man and nature. Furthermore, the cognitive capacities that play a central role in the Western debate on moral status of entities is less important in (some of) the Chinese debates on the moral relevance of humans and animals. This can be a start to reflect (once again) on the rational capacities as the exclusive criterion for entering the moral circle.

Finally, given the fact that animals are kept worldwide and that animal products are part of global trade, animal welfare has a global dimension too. Therefore, it is crucial that the Chinese and the Western traditions are brought together in order find ways to discuss the moral position of animals and animal welfare.

## Conclusion

If we turn to the question in the title of this paper, we can conclude that animal welfare with regard to animal food production is a shared moral problem. However, our answer has two dimensions. First, the problem is shared because both from a Western and a Chinese perspective we have good reasons to take the welfare of animals that are kept for food production seriously. It explicitly is not a Western idea only. There are clear indications that – in spite of the differences – the Confucian and Daoist traditions provide opportunities to take the interests of animal seriously and to define duties towards animals with regard to welfare. Second, it should be a shared problem because the short presentation of the Chinese traditions shows that traditional Chinese philosophy can contribute to the improvement of the Chinese debate on animal welfare, and can be an incentive to find ways to discuss animal welfare on a global level.

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### **Section 3**

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