

A TALE OF TWO DOGS

Disagreement over a beloved tradition divides a country

A gust of chilly wind, the kind that blows only on the coldest days of December, herds me deeper into my coat. Below banners whipping back and forth, regiments of the young and old alike mill about, preparing for New Year's festivities. I approach the entrance of the sprawling market and trudge towards its center. Thousands of colorful tents crammed together extend as far as the eye can see, with people stuffed in every available space between them. I dig my way, elbow to elbow, deeper into the labyrinth of makeshift stalls, winding through corridors of \$1 sock vendors and sesame seed oil stands, before the abrupt smell of animal stench assaults my senses. As the aisles of sock merchants become butcher stands, I pass through arrays of chopping blocks, each one bearing a slab of meat, a rack of ribs, even a hind leg with black claws and small tufts of fur. I've found it. The largest dog meat district in Korea unfolds before me.

The Moran dog market, just a 25-minute drive south of downtown Seoul, boasts the best prices in the country. \$6.80 per pound of dog shank proves this market the Mecca of dog meat. Hundreds of butcher shops are open for business, with their diverse collections of dogs, attracting a wide range of avid dog eaters. Ironically, the market is also one of the largest hubs for pet owners seeking a family dog or pet supplies. It feels surreal, the street pet shops located at the heart of the dog meat district, the sound of vendors haggling and attracting pedestrians to dogs that might as easily be given a new home as be eaten. But most of the customers here don't notice or care about the striking disparity; they must be regulars. The market opens once every five days starting on the

4th of each month, spanning four blocks of what is typically a public parking lot. Customers from every corner of the country come to Moran, each seeking the key ingredient of their time-honored dishes.

Not all Koreans, however, salivate at the mention of dog meat. Buddhists abstain from eating dog for religious reasons, believing that it ensures years—exactly three years, according to my mother-- of bad karma to eat possibly reincarnated friends and family from past lives. Growing up in a family of long-standing Buddhist, I was always aware of Koreans' dog eating practices, but never paid them any attention. Huddled over beers, my male friends sometimes joked that they should have dog broth to make their girlfriends happy; drinking dog broth to improve sexual stamina is the most prevalent myth about dog meat in Korea. It wasn't until I came to America, where I was frequently questioned about Koreans' dog eating habits that I became curious about how it is perceived in other countries.

Stemming from a history of dog consumption, the tradition is still deeply ingrained in Korean culture. People maintain the practice for different reasons, using a variety of recipes—broth, casserole, and extract for medicinal purposes. Middle-aged women prepare dog broth for their husbands, hoping to fortify them for the waning years of their sexual lives. Mothers caring for loved ones struck by severe illness or recovering from a major operation concoct their special remedy soup to expedite recovery. As the pressure of the sporting season mounts, athletes often take a dose of dog extract. Others order dog broth for no other reason than to enjoy a hearty bowl of soup.

Such is the case for Kim Ui Young, a 31-year-old Berkeley engineering graduate student. Kim and I came to know each other through a mutual friend, and soon found that as international graduate students of the same generation, we shared a host of similar interests. The first signs of dissonance became apparent when we broached the subject of dog eating. Kim's been an avid dog eater since his childhood. For as long as he can remember, his mother always prepared a secret remedy anytime a family member fell ill. Mother Kim would put the soup on the stove and their kitchen soon filled with the thick smell of meat and roasting sesame. Like so many other nights from Kim's childhood, this is one of his fondest memories of growing up in Seoul in the 90's.

Steam poured forth from a massive iron pot, and the young Kim soon found his mouth watering. Once the soup had cooked for two hours, Kim would go to the table hoping to catch a morsel while his mother stripped the meat into shreds and placed it in the broth. At Kim's heel was Worry (a common name in Korea, because it echoes the sounds dogs make), a Chihuahua, anxious to ensure his part of the feast. Stirred by the night's potent aromas, Worry always wagged his tail in a frenzy. "It's interesting that I've never put those two dogs—the ones in my broth and my pet Worry—at the same level," Kim says.

In Korea, the so-called 'yellow dog'—or 'shit dog', its literal translation based on its diet of people's scraps or feces—is a type of dog bred for slaughter like pigs and cows. They were integrated into Korean society long before dogs began to be considered pets. Largely mixed breeds, and typically raised outdoors, the yellow dog is often bred to be consumed or sold at markets. To Kim, Worry and yellow dogs couldn't be more different. Unlike the dogs people typically raise, Kim says yellow dogs lack emotion and spirit. "You'd understand what I mean if you looked into their eyes. They're just dull."

Not all Koreans agree with Kim. To many of his fellow countrymen, it's puzzling that the practice could be maintained in a country where approximately one in every five households includes pet dogs as family members. In a nation one-fourth the size of California, I wondered how this dichotomy could exist—a yellow dog in the meat market, soon to be eaten, inhabiting the cage next to a beagle destined for a loving family. But this is more than a tale of two dogs. The societal outcry that has erupted throughout the country in recent years, both challenging and defending the dog eating tradition in domestic and international forums, reflects the dynamic state of a rapidly globalizing country.

How the dog eating tradition developed in Korea

Since the Chosun dynasty of the 14th Century, some of Korea's earliest documented records depict the consumption of dog. Initially, the taste for dog meat was driven by necessity. In a country where 70 percent of the landmass consists of mountainous terrain,

farming practices were less suited to breeding large numbers of livestock. Chickens were expensive and scarce in the old days. Cattle were treated with respect for their work capacity and the central role they played in the rice-farming, agrarian society. Eating cattle before they'd been retired from years of farm labor was considered absurd. Instead, hunting wild dogs was an easier alternative to replenish protein and maintain a family's valuable livestock.

The practice wasn't limited to simple peasant folk but extended to the upper reaches of aristocracy. A letter by Chosun's greatest Confucian philosopher, Chung Yak-Yong, demonstrates how common dog meat was in Korean society. In a letter addressed to his brother, who was embroiled in political strife and exiled to a remote island, Chung describes in detail dog broth recipe, hoping it'll help nurse his brother back to health. "Hang its entire body and peel off the skin, after gutting the intestines. I was told that thousands of wild dogs inhabit the island you are on. I would have hunted at least one dog every five days." Alongside Chung's letter, published in *Connoisseurs of Chosun* (2012) is a collection of other dog-related documents. According to the Annals of the Royal Dynasty, steamed dog was a delicacy, served as the birthday dinner of the King's mother.

The idea that dog meat is the most affordable and readily available source of protein no longer applies, but it continues to be consumed for its other properties long associated with it. Peak dog broth season falls unequivocally on the hottest three days of the lunar year, aptly named "Dog Holidays." Unceasing streams of customers line up for the soup, believing that it will recharge inner *Yang* and help them endure Korea's stifling heat, which is traditionally considered *Yin*. According to Rak Hyun Kim, in his Ph.D thesis "Dog Meat in Korea: Socio-Legal Challenge," the strongly persistent myth correlating dog meat with increased sexual stamina also stems from ancient Chinese metaphysical theory. *Yin* is characterized as a feminine and sexually depleting force, requiring something strong in *Yang*—like dog meat—to counter it. Founded upon a medicinal practice thousands of years old, this deeply ingrained concept has long attracted Korean males to the dish, and perhaps transformed its contemporary relevance to something more, something symbolic of one's masculinity.

In our interview, I asked Kim about his own family traditions. Kim Ui Young recounts some of his fondest memories, those of the summertime. Each year on Dog Holidays, Kim went for picnics in a deep mountain valley accompanied by his older male relatives. The family ritual was always a highly anticipated event, and a reprieve from Korea's smothering summer heat. As a group, the men would pick a dog to bring with them. Kim remembers vividly how some of the animals struggled on the way to the valley. Perhaps they instinctively felt death near at hand, he says. "The dogs would become very unwieldy, so my dad used to lift them up and carry them to the picnic destination."

When they arrived at the picnicking area, Kim's father would put their mutt in a mesh bag, hang it up, and beat it with a stick. Kim says this was supposed to make the meat tender, a result of the adrenaline generated. Indeed, he could distinguish the difference in taste, he claims, between dogs killed by a stun gun and those bludgeoned to death (medical studies, however, have found no correlation between beating dogs to death and the meat tenderness). The dog would then be purged with a torch lamp, its fur seared away, and then its belly cut open for gutting and cleansing. The family would wash the waste from the intestines, a special delicacy among dog connoisseurs.

The recipe is simple enough: simmer the dog's entire body for two hours. Meanwhile, prepare soybean paste, a handful of ground black pepper and a pinch of salt. The soybean paste base soup harmonizes with ginger, sesame leaf, and generates a strong, earthy smell, masking the odor of the meat. *Bosintang*, selling at \$10 a bowl, literally translates to 'soup of invigoration' in Korea, but for Westerners, and non-dog eaters like me, it's just dog broth.

The family picnic I remember is a bit different from Kim's. My family also used to go to a mountain valley for camping and my mother always prepared Gimbab, a seaweed sushi roll made of diverse vegetables, common for the family lunch. After pitching our tents, my dad would make his special Kimchi stew, adding pieces of pork belly to make it more flavorful. The pork belly was our only source of protein, but I don't recall any of my family members having trouble amidst the summer heat. I wonder how

we, three girls—my two older sisters and I—would have reacted if we had witnessed the dog slaughtering as children.

Kim reminisces once more on his own summer picnic. “No other vacation can compare with it. I felt like it took forever while I was waiting for the dish to finish cooking.” From time to time, Kim’s dad would simmer the intestines they already had cleansed and give it to the children, whom, Kim recalls, “couldn’t contain their excitement for the food.” Kim also remembers how he once saw a dog head bobbing about in the pot. “It was customary in my grandparents’ generation to eat the head—and it was a real shock to me.” Although he loved the stew, Kim admits that he had to quit eating it, “for at least a few hours,” he added wryly. While the dog cooked, Kim often sat dipping his feet at the water’s edge with the valley spread before him. Dad and the other adults would play poker and drink sake.

In Kim’s early teens, the family could no longer maintain their yearly picnic gatherings. For most households, the long-standing tradition persisted until the late 1980’s, when Korea and its way of life came under the scrutiny of the international community.

The Seoul Olympics and the birth of a conflict

What had developed into a revered tradition—maybe not for everyone, but for a great many—changed with the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Up until securing the games, Korea had lived in relative seclusion. During the three decades following the end of the Korean War, in 1953, the government focused on economic development, and for the military regime in power at the time, hosting an international event was a chance to demonstrate to the world Korea’s mounting potential. The regime was right in some respects, but it didn’t anticipate all of the consequences. All of a sudden, Western media shined its spotlight on the reclusive Asian country, and one of the first things it noticed: Koreans ate dogs.

The West was up in arms, international organizations cried out, arranging physical protests, sending official complaint letters to government offices, and threatening to boycott international events and products made in Korea. Aghast at the coverage, Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested a prohibition on dog eating, and immediately the Seoul city government complied, banning the sale of dog meat in Seoul and classifying dog broth as a "repugnant food." The government also revoked numerous restaurant owners' licenses.

Customers and vendors, however, were not ready to adjust to the rapid change. People persisted in buying and selling dog meat. Dog broth dens covertly facilitated their business, restaurant owners shifted their signage from 'dog broth' to a secretive call sign: 'continue.' Many long-time Korean customers *continued* to enjoy their dog broth, but the government's reaction to the Western backlash left them indignant.

Very little changed in the countryside. People like my grandparents, who lived in rural villages, were still maintaining their business. My grandparents used to raise several yellow dogs in their backyard and sell them to dog contractors. Typically visiting the town by bike, contractors often carried a small dog in tow, bumping along in the 3X2 foot cage resting above the rear wheel. I would take care of the puppies and call them by nicknames, like 'happy', or 'healthy', but they had always disappeared when I returned a few months later. After losing my newly found friends several times, I stopped naming them. My grandparents' maintained this lucrative side job until late 90's.

For those living in Korea's metropolitan areas, however, the international atmosphere of the Olympic Games spurred an already rapidly Westernizing subculture. Rising living standards, coupled with an influx of Western products and media, firmly transplanted the concept of the "pet dog" and its related businesses into Korean society, cultivating a booming dog-loving pet industry. Virtually overnight, families, like Kim's, began raising dogs as indoor pets—dogs weren't typically allowed to live inside the home before—and the concept of "animal companion" became acceptable. At about that time, in the late 1980's, I was also given my first pet dog, 'Kiwi,' a mutt, covered entirely with snow-white fur. It was my birthday gift. I was seven years old. I still vividly remember the soft warmth of my puppy when I first tucked him under my blanket.

Emboldened by the shift in mood, Koreans who had secretly abandoned the dog eating practice started to speak up against the tradition. The words ‘animal welfare’ and ‘activist’ emerged around this time. These first activist groups branded the growing rift in Korean society. The leader of the Coexistence of Animal Rights on Earth (CARE), Park So Yeon, commented regarding this societal change, “we should abide by widely accepted international courtesy standards.” She strongly argued that the practice seriously harms the nation’s image.

Despite the controversy, and growing division within Korea, no clear solution surfaced in 1988. The government’s ban on dog broth was restricted to Seoul. And after the Olympics, the regulation was largely ignored. Stuck between a beloved tradition and a new wave of pet dog culture, the government was paralyzed by indecision. Social discord over dog eating had come to head in Korean society for the first time, but the hundreds of years of tradition would not be changed so easily, and eating dog crept back into Korean daily life.

World Cup, round two of international scrutiny

In about 15 years, the dog broth controversy flared up a second time, during the 2002 FIFA Korea-Japan World Cup. Once again, Korea came under the scrutiny of the West. FIFA’s president officially asked the government to ban the sale of dog meat in shops and restaurants, at least until the global event ended and foreigners returned home. The government’s subsequent refusal to comply, followed by an untimely radio interview, threw Korea into complete turmoil.

Bridget Bardot, a former French movie star who had become an avid animal activist, was interviewed on a popular Korean radio show during the games. A few years earlier, she’d openly criticized Korea’s dog eating culture, which had angered some Koreans, but now she would go further, insulting the entire country and alienating pet owners and dog eaters alike.

Bardot's clear voice resounded across the telephone line on MBC's morning radio show. "Dog eating can't be considered as culture," she said. And her interviewer responded, "Do you know there're two different kinds of dogs, those for food and those kept as pets?" After a brief pause, Bardot's voice sharpened, "The standard is ridiculous. It's same as racial discrimination to me." She went on to say that livestock are "supposed to be eaten from the beginning of their lives; dogs are born to be man's companions." Bardot abruptly hung up the phone with one last seething message, "French don't eat dogs, unless perhaps their Korean friends have deceived them."

Bardot's phone call was met with ardent opposition, upsetting dog eaters and dog-lovers alike. Korean assemblymen Kim Hong Sin, in his manifesto "Dog Meat Non-Intervention," claimed, "Bardot's idea, denying a culture, is nothing different from cultural imperialism." Young people, who had been relatively supportive of activists, took offense. Suddenly, the conversation shifted from the pros and cons of an ancient dietary practice to something far more serious. For this emerging first world society, now under assault, dog eating became a source of national pride.

Activists were dismayed by Bardot's outburst. "The original issue Bardot wanted to talk about might have been the dignity of life. She just didn't have a refined interview demeanor," activist Park So Hyun said. For years afterward, Bardot became the default uneducated racist persona in every Korean comedy sketch.

Despite their disappointment and, in many cases, outrage, activists turned their attention back to their struggles to establish dogs as companions, this time focusing on the legal status of dog meat. Despite the astonishing pet dog population in Korea, which seemed to multiply geometrically during late 80's, dog was still the 4th most consumed meat in Korea, after pork, beef, and chicken. Though it had been almost two decades since the Government designated dog broth as a 'repugnant food' during the Seoul Olympics, there still wasn't clear legislation about the explicit recognition of dog meat as a legitimate food, nor a clear ban on the sale or slaughter of dog. In the midst of this legal uncertainty, the processing of dog meat was driven underground, with no official guidelines to guarantee untainted meat or the proper treatment of animals. Activist groups

demanded that the Government ban dog meat nationwide. The dog meat industry, of course, took the opposite position.

Unable to make progress, the two sides finally reached a consensus—to include dogs in the category of livestock, but stopped short of banning dog meat sales. Fearing public resentment from both sides, however, the Government adopted a “regulation without legalization” approach, establishing the initial legal basis for regulating the dog meat industry. Compelled to break the policy deadlock, the government announced in 2008 its plan to classify dogs as livestock under the Livestock Process Act (LPA). But once again it failed in the face of activist opposition, who argued that dog slaughtering should be facilitated strictly under Animal Protect Law instead.

The two decades of ambiguous policy forced upon the dog meat industry a debilitating atmosphere of secrecy, which caused many of its own harmful repercussions—most prominently, disease outbreaks.

How things stand today

Twenty years of controversy over dog meat and the lack of legal regulation have made it difficult for dog eaters like Kim to maintain their lifestyle. By the time he left Korea, in 2009, he hardly went to dog broth restaurants. Kim’s family dog broth dinners and summer picnics had already ceased. The places where Kim’s family could get dog meat were not always the cleanest, and as Kim got older he discovered a reality typically undisclosed regarding the distribution of dog meat. A food health documentary, *You Are Eating Your Friends* (KBS, 2008), dealt a heavy blow to Korean dog eaters.

The documentary opens with a white pick-up truck pulling up in front of a shop located deep within the dog meat district of Moran market. In a dimly lit cement garage, gallons of water boil. An elderly man with a black apron stands calmly, clutching a small stun gun in his right hand. The butcher house staff set to their tasks silently, and a beagle, Alaskan malamute, and schnauzer are led one-by-one to the elder black apron man. With

a quick jab to the neck, the dogs are driven to the cement. Their limbs hyper extend in a dramatic death pose and they're swept away to the boiling pots.

The producer, her spy cam hidden in her bag, approaches the butcher and asks if she may taste test the meat. A few minutes pass, and the vendor brings her to the butcher shop's back yard. Dog cages fill up every inch of the walls. About ten dogs are tightly crammed in a 6x8 foot cage, forced onto their stomachs. Most of them are yellow dogs, but some typical house breeds are also present. "We do sell pet dogs to customers who desire smaller portions of meat," the vendor says. "They taste just as good as yellow dogs."

According to the documentary, most of the non-yellow dogs came from the streets, where they were abandoned by their families. Quality control tests show that the dogs in Moran market's butcher shops often carry staphylococcus, colon bacillus, and traces of antibiotics exceeding hazardous health standard limits, according to a study conducted by the Research Institute of Public Health & Environment, Seoul Metropolitan Government. An expert states that most abandoned dogs sold in the market have serious diseases—skin cancers, in some of the worst cases, and that's why a large amount of antibiotics are detected in the meat. "It's not hard to guess how bad it is for consumers who eat those dogs," the interviewee adds.

One dog seller claims that they sell dogs with skin diseases at half price. Restaurant owners hardly distinguish healthy meat from tainted meat, especially after the slaughtered dogs have been cleansed, their fur completely burned away by torch lamps. Butchered meat from dogs infected with other contagious disease also is distributed without anyone knowing the difference. Intestines or other organs do not usually accompany these dogs, as infection is more apparent and easily detectable in those organs. "Frozen dog meat sold without intestines is 100 percent certain to come from diseased dogs," assures the dog seller.

No wonder Kim was shocked. Other dog eaters had the same reaction. "I quit eating dog after watching this documentary. I never imagined that the dogs I had been eating were abandoned or had fatal diseases." Kim adds, "I felt like I had become a

barbarian when I realized that I ate abandoned pet dogs. I wasn't that desperately addicted to dog stew." After the documentary aired, revealing just how frequently abandoned pet dogs end up in customers' soups, Kim and his family members completely lost their appetite for the fuzzy four-legged mammal.

The documentary elicited indignation not just not only from the Kim's but also many other dog eaters, their anger mainly directed toward dog restaurant and farm owners. Some people blamed the government for its tepid attitude and ambiguity. Many people admitted that they quit eating dog meat, like Kim's family, to a survey conducted after the show was aired. Dog farm owners also voiced their responses to the documentary. The president of a prominent dog farm coalition group, Choi Young In, said, "All these controversies are a product of stupid, ineffective laws. All the government cares about is trying not to provoke controversy from either side of the dog dichotomy, and so it remains paralyzed."

To this day, there are no clear regulating the care and slaughtering of yellow dogs and pet dogs. And the only change people in the dog meat industry want, Choi says, is to include dogs under the Processing of Livestock Products Act (PLPA). Even though the government recognized dogs as livestock under the Livestock Products Act (LPA) in 2011, permitting vendors to raise dogs as livestock, there are still no legal boundaries for dog meat under the PLPA, and thus sparse legislation regulating the hygienic conditions of dog meat distribution. Despite recent efforts, the industry continues to operate outside the government's legal jurisdiction.

2012: The dog meat conundrum continues

Kim Ui Young leans back against a white wall in the corner of a small, crowded room, basking in the full earthy smell of meat and spices. A huge stainless pot filled with a brown meat stew boils in front of us. It's winter break; this is his first time home after a three-year absence. The first place Kim wanted to visit was this restaurant, Ehwa, where he ate dog broth for many years prior to seeing the documentary. That was about four

years ago, right before he stopped coming here. But now, he needs his life-long remedy, in his own way, and this is it.

The sounds of chewing dominate the room. “Have some,” Kim says to me, between mouthfuls. With a sip of the thick, spicy looking broth, he’s already finished his third bowl. “Don’t you eat dog?” he asks, noticing me picking at my vegetable sticks. Without missing a beat, Kim continues enjoying the feast. I didn’t know that most dog restaurants in Korea have no other dishes, but only dog meat. I was starving. But ironically, the creamy orange color soup failed to stimulate my appetite. I was thinking about my black toy poodle, the one I lost a few years ago. Next to us, a friendly plump woman with an unfaltering smile—she looked to be in her 50’s—flopped onto her knees and skillfully filleted dark brown meat from a network of ribs, dropping them into the boiling soup.

“The only thing I care about is whether it’s safe or not to eat.” Kim’s calm voice resounds within the room. He knows that finding a reliable source of clean meat is unlikely to happen given the ambiguous legal state of the dog meat industry. I sense that tonight will be the exception during Kim’s abstinence from eating dog, a last resort to help his recovery from the constant struggles while living abroad.

The conundrum hasn’t yet been solved in Korea. Last summer’s ‘Moran Dog Meat Festival’, planned by the dog meat coalition to promote clean dog butchering practices, was fiercely opposed by activists groups, and halted in its tracks. The coordinator of the festival, Ann Yong Geun, said, “It’s understandable about all the controversy, but people need to admit dog meat is Korea’s traditional food.” He’s also well known as ‘Dr. Dog Meat,’ having devoted twenty years to research on the meat. As a professor at Chung-Cheong University’s nutrition department, he’s invented an unusual variety of products, such as dog facial cream and cookies. Dr. Ann claims that he will continue to experiment until his array of dog products are accepted as a normal part of everyday life.

The driven activist, Park So Yeon, is still preoccupied with her investigative reporting, attempting to catch abusive dog slaughtering amidst the convoluted network of

laws surrounding the industry. Though it is not illegal to raise, breed, or slaughter dogs for dog meat, it is illegal under the Animal Protection Law for dog butchers to process dogs like livestock for use in any kind of food product. If caught, the butcher is susceptible to a monetary penalty or a sentence of up to a year in jail. Park once found a bible resting on a chopping board when her group raided an illegal dog-butcher site. Park said, “They know it’s such a terrible thing that they have to be forgiven.”

As the societal controversy continues, more than two million unregulated dogs—an industry worth about \$1.32 billion--are consumed in Korea every year.