

Who is the Weak?

A Critical Examination of the Construction of 'Weak' and 'Strong' Interests From the Case of Dog Protection in Chinese Society

Jean-Baptiste Pettier

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IZO | Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Ostasienstudien

Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies

Goethe University Frankfurt am Main

Senckenberganlage 31

D-60325 Frankfurt am Main

T: +49(0)69 798 23284

F: +49(0)69 798 23275

E: izo@uni-frankfurt.de

H: www.izo.uni-frankfurt.de

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Abstract

Mobilizations in defence of ‘companion animals’ have become major sites of contestation in Chinese society in recent years. They often reject the existing ambiguity between the use of these animals as pets and as meat, demanding unambiguous respect for and protection of dogs. However, in a society where inequalities are as significant as in China, where the level of poverty, sickness, and environmental and industrial tragedies appears overwhelming, one may ask how pets’ destinies have become such a symbolic focus and source of occasional fury – for both Chinese and foreign audiences. Taking this question seriously, this article aims to examine such mobilizations in China – demanding the protection of dogs – as a starting point to theoretically unwrap the more general problem of how the perception of certain beings as ‘weak’ and as deserving the protection of society is socially constructed, and what the related choices imply. I argue that to better understand these mobilizations to protect dogs, we should not separate the focus of the calls for protection from the social web of relationships and oppositions in which they are entrenched.

Key words

mobilizations, China, protection, victims, social justice, dogs

Autorenangaben/Kontakt

Dr. Jean-Baptiste Pettier
Institut für Ethnologie
Universität zu Köln
jb.pettier@gmail.com

Mobilizations in defence of dogs and against their brutalization, their consumption as meat, and state regulations concerning them, have become major sites of contestation in Chinese society in recent years. With the development of new urban lifestyles and the consumption of Western cultural media, these animals' place within the society and the overall perception of them has been transformed. However, this transformation has not come without conflicts, occasionally resulting in direct confrontations between those people who consider these animals as deserving of protection and others who consider them to be no different from other animals and, consequently, as edible.

How can we understand the social choices according to which some beings are qualified as 'weak' and in need of protection? Public demonstrations, legal decisions, or the institutionalization of measures of resource redistribution are other settings where this social phenomenon habitually takes place. Such processes are often framed according to the premises of solidarity, generosity, or political equality. However, the choices upon which they are based have far-reaching implications, because of the distinctions they produce. And, as I demonstrate, no 'objective' independent criteria can fully and satisfactorily explain how these decisions are taken. None of the arguments concerning who deserves the protection of society should thus, I argue, be considered to be external to the social web of relationships amongst which they take shape. I postulate that by examining how the 'weak' can be better understood in relation to the 'strong' who call for their protection, rather than through the objectivist arguments usually used to justify the selection of the former, we can examine the intellectual process that underlies protective claims more generally. I support the idea that isolating this relationship allows us to gain an understanding of the political motives entrenched in debates on moral and cultural values. Taking the discourses of present-day dog-protection activists in China as a central theme – based on interviews conducted in the cities of Chengdu, Beijing, and Tangshan in the fall of 2014 – this article articulates examples from fieldwork into a more abstract analysis in order to theoretically inquire into the 'weak' and 'strong' relationship and its implications.

Dog as companion, dog as meat: A categorical contestation

Within animal-rights circles, the rural southern Chinese municipality of Yulin is now famous worldwide. For many, it has become a symbol of barbarism against which petitions circulate regularly. Activists condemn the dog-meat festival established there, in a region where consuming dog meat was previously a common but private practice in the period of the year chosen for the festival, the summer solstice. As a touristic and economic attraction for dog-meat gourmets, the annual event has certainly been a success, but in a much more ambiguous way than its creators probably antici-

pated. Beyond the circles of dog-meat eaters, it has also attracted the attention of horrified opponents, who have mobilized large numbers of domestic and international dog-as-pet rather than dog-as-meat lovers against it. This strong opposition has been undertaken in the name of both love for dogs and food safety, as the origin of the dogs is denounced as untraceable. The controversy has rapidly become a major source of embarrassment to local authorities, who emphasize the autonomy of the festival organizers and try to defend the practice and the event against this opposition, but have not been able to resolve it.

As a matter of fact, the tensions these officials are confronted with largely surpass their limited area of authority. They epitomize the contradictions entailed in the ongoing transformation of the social role of dogs in China. The mobilizations in dogs' favour, and particularly the call to consider the entire species taboo for eating, are new and reflect important changes both in the local perceptions of companion animals (Littlefair, 2006; Boyd, 2013) and in the level of consumption of such animals' meat (Zhan, 2006). Though the practice of eating dogs or cats is not illegal, the harassment of people who cook these animals has become more and more frequent, generating repeated controversial headlines and furore on social media (Boyd, 2013). Beyond the issue of meat consumption, Chinese pet lovers have raised their voices regularly in defence of their companions, even directly challenging the state's policies towards them. Local limitations to pet-dog sizes in Beijing created public outrage and resulted in demonstrations as early as 2006, less than a decade after the 1999 repression of Falun Gong followers (see Palmer, 2005), which had made any public demonstration seem risky. This general context makes these mobilizations particularly impressive, and makes the study of companion animals' protection in China a very interesting case to examine.

The ambiguous historical space of dogs in China

While in a modern Western context dogs fulfil the role of companions without major ambiguity, such has not always been the case, and this attitude remains far from universal (see Baratay, 2012; MacFarlane, 1987; Rosaldo, 1993 [1989]: 26–7; Strathern, 1992). In China, some dogs serve as a source of meat while others are companion animals, and this has been the case from very ancient times onwards (see Elisseeff, 1993).¹ Therefore, what characterizes the place of 'dogs' in the Chinese social context? A great number of clichés about imperial and modern China have circulated widely throughout the Western world, and sometimes retroactively in China as well, during the two

¹ They are not the only species to face this ambiguous use. The same applies, for example, in the case of horses in Western countries, as they are used for work and recreation during their lives then sent to be put to sleep when they become too old for these careers. This ambivalence is, however, not always well received by those who spend leisure time with horses, and who very often reject this change of category.

last centuries. Of these, a significant number have directly concerned animals that are usually considered ‘pets’ in a modern Western context. These old representations often ill-inform the perception of this society’s relationships with animals, giving way to an understanding entrapped between fascination and repulsion. Historically, British and American elites of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries developed a widely documented fascination with Chinese dog breeds, which was intimately linked with their epoch’s colonialism. In particular, Pekingese dogs were associated with the excesses and the exuberant lifestyle of the Chinese imperial family, an association particularly readable in Western cultural representations of China of the time. Following the sacking of Beijing’s Summer Palace in 1860, some of these dogs were taken away by British soldiers and transported to Britain (Turner, 1920; Matthews, 2002) while others were obtained by merchants. This context gave the breed a to-be-protected and cherished treasure’s status. In return, this status certainly impacted later Chinese national elites’ perception of the dogs, as these were based on similar views.

According to historical sources, pet dogs were specifically bred by imperial authorities for centuries. Their presence at the imperial court is attested to in representations and literature from as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD). The imperial Pekingese breed was legally reserved for imperial authorities, and the dogs’ allegedly divine origins gave them a specific imperial protection (Coren, 2002) that was not extended to other breeds. Chinese legends about the ‘lion-dog’ construct it as the sacred descendant of the pairing of a lion with a marmoset, thereby ascribing it nobility of character and superior intelligence. Subsequent Anglo-American breeders substantiated this reputation by emphasizing the fierce temperament and ‘unusual courage’ (Turner, 1920: 521) of the little dog: ‘... it was considered only natural for a Chinese palace dog to exhibit what was thought to be aristocratic Chinese behavior as an innate or instinctive aspect of its breeding’ (Cheang, 2006: 363). In twentieth-century revolutionary China, this historical frame had a strong impact on the dogs’ destiny, as they continued to be regarded as a symbol of ‘bourgeois’ distinction. Large numbers of these socially stigmatized pets were eliminated during the Cultural Revolution (Kinmond, 1957: 162–165). However, the absence of documentation on these cases renders the examination of the real motives complicated, as they could also have been linked to the famines China regularly experienced at that time (Metailié, 1988). As we will see later, this first – distinctively ‘bourgeois’ – frame might be considered as having been revitalized today, as raising pets remains largely a symbol of modernization and of the social consumption of a Westernized or elite/upper-middle-class way of life.

Nevertheless, Pekingese can hardly be considered to reflect the general fate of China’s companion animals. If dogs were historically associated with heroic and legendary figures, the symbolic

value they were ascribed declined over time (Huot, 2015), and being associated with dogs could and can also be an insult. A divine dog ancestor was, for example, attributed to the southern ethnic Yao minority, who were considered barbarians by the Han majority (Birell, 1993; Mair, 1998). Here as elsewhere, the dogs played an obviously ambiguous role between mythology and rejection, companion and meal. In his controversial 1894 book *Chinese Characteristics*, the American missionary Arthur Smith describes every city of China as ‘infested’ with ‘pariah dogs’ (Smith, 1894: 136), testifying to the general indifference with which they were regarded in everyday society.

Eliminating the ambiguity: The invention of a new, unified space for dogs in China

The perceptible change in attitudes towards dogs demonstrated by the opposition to Yulin’s dog-meat festival is not an isolated phenomenon. Over the last two decades, as China’s economic reforms have been implemented, many people around the country have developed the idea of doing something for these animals. Often, their actions have consisted of establishing shelters for abandoned pets. Beginning with one or two stray dogs found on the street that they pitied, some have found themselves a few years later with shelters covering hundreds of square metres and filled with thousands of canines requiring daily care, often at the cost of their own comfort. This has been the case for Mrs Chen, a locally famous businesswoman in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, who began to care for a few city dogs in 1997. She has now dedicated her retirement to managing the ‘Home of Love Animal Protecting Center’ (*sic*), a shelter for more than 4,000 animals she has founded in the remote countryside of the region, at significant cost to her own living circumstances and fortune.

This gesture of sympathy towards animals is far from unique. The post-Mao period has been characterized by a large increase in the level of pet ownership among urban citizens,² certainly as much as the previous period was characterized by their absence. While the presence of dogs as a part of social life is not new in the history of China, the present, and dramatic, increase is specifically linked by many activists to the development of new lifestyles and single children’s solitary education. The consumption of a dog-companion culture is not an isolated phenomenon. Self-perceived avant-garde elites, wealthy enthusiasts, and other moral entrepreneurs are investing time, energy, and money in protecting dogs, and in educating people in order to change their perception. Their aim is to improve how dogs are treated, and to make their consumption as meat progressively

² In China, market research from 2004 showed that pet ownership had increased by 20 per cent since 1999 (see <http://www.marketresearchworld.net/content/view/281/77>). The constant growth in pet food sales and insurance supports the idea that the number of companion animals has steadily increased since that time.

disappear. External factors may also have had an impact. Several international campaigns criticizing Chinese practices towards animals, in particular dogs, have circulated through international social media, sometimes obtaining great coverage and worldwide readership. By focusing attention on these topics and contributing to a negative international perception of Chinese society and culture, these campaigns have without doubt interfered with the Chinese government's objective of promoting itself as a modern state, as the banning of dog-meat consumption during the 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrated.³ Whatever the reasons, the position of dogs within the society has been progressively remodelled, at least amongst privileged urbanites, as the very visible development of pet-related businesses in recent years demonstrates.

The burden and selectivity of pity

The moral mission these companion-animal activists assign themselves is not an easy one. By endorsing the destiny of an entire species, each member of which should be given the same personal importance, they have taken on a literally endless project. Many of the people I interviewed expressed fatalism given the immensity of the task, even while maintaining a will to change things. However, they expressed clearly that their idea was not to save all dogs on earth, but rather to sustain the progressive implementation of a moral and cultural baseline concerning the minimal level of respect due to these animals. As a young Tangshan activist told me, the main objective of their actions is to promote (*tuīguǎng*) a better understanding of animals' needs. Many Chinese people are now pet owners for the first time, so the activists try to make them understand that animals are not toys but have a personality and emotions, and that they can fall sick and need care. To her, it was, however, obvious that it will take a long time before people understand this. 'My generation won't see it, but maybe the next one,' this 28-year-old woman told me, while explicitly dreaming of 'brainwashing' her fellow citizens to teach them how to treat dogs properly.

In trying to understand these activists' concerns, it is important to observe that most of them are not vegetarian and that many of them explicitly reject a too-general animal cause. The Tangshan activist herself insisted on the specificity of animals such as dogs and cats, considering them superior and closer to human beings. She expressed strong annoyance at the discourse of animal-rights activists concerning the protection of cows or pigs. 'In theory, you could say it is the same,' she told me, 'but this is not true. In real life, no one ever adopts a cow as a pet. Thousands of years ago, hu-

³ While this aspect could be viewed as being important internationally, I am reluctant to over-emphasize it to justify grassroots-level mobilizations. While some higher-level activists I interviewed emphasized their experience of the 'shame' of being Chinese while abroad, others were visibly ignorant of the existence of such international campaigns, even to the point of questioning me about the state of dog-meat consumption in Europe.

man beings chose dogs and cats as work and life companions. It may be unfair to other species but it is the way it is. We cannot treat these ones like any other and keep eating them.’

This visible absence of concern for other species’ destinies is not the only way in which the cause these activists have embraced – and to which they dedicate their energy, time, and often money – appears to be selective. In a society where inequalities are as significant as in China and where the number of known environmental and industrial catastrophes is so overwhelming, their focus on these animals could undoubtedly be questioned. One could also certainly ask how pets’ destinies can become such a source of occasional fury – both for the Chinese and for the foreign audiences who sign petitions on these animals’ behalf. Here, I do not imply that the attention given to dogs is unjustified, nor that those who call for their statutory protection have forgotten about their fellow humans’ destinies or the larger environmental catastrophes that China’s uncontrolled industrialization has led to. These issues generate demonstrations, too, which other people – and occasionally the same people – engage in. However, the level of emotional engagement unleashed in the name of dogs catches one’s attention. It is an excellent base from which to theoretically unwrap the way in which the perception of certain beings as ‘weak’ and deserving of society’s protection is socially constructed.

Searching for objective criteria for weakness

How certain issues, as opposed to others, become consensual objects of concern that generate calls for protection is a question that is rarely examined. It is a question that is particularly sensitive, as it implies recurrent questions of equality (Why does everyone speak of X and never of Y?) and often positions victims (sufferers of rare diseases, disadvantaged populations, endangered species, etc.) in competition for public attention. Objectivity, here, is a major concern, since it is explicitly called for through calls for ‘justice’ and simultaneously ignored due to the fact that mobilizations are rarely based on entirely rational criteria. Ideally, one would think that the priority given to one particular group (pet dogs, white dolphins, eagles, or ants, to limit ourselves to animals) should be determined by criteria that objectively establish the order in which protection should be given, based on an incontestable necessity. Such is in theory the approach of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which – with regard to animals – tracks species’ populations and establishes regularly updated lists of their estimated level of endangerment. Understandably, pet dogs are not among them, and endangerment hardly seems to be the motive behind calls for dogs’ protection. Instead of species, local activist associations focus on individual destinies. From this viewpoint, two other objectively definable criteria threaten at least some individual dogs: the possibility of mistreatment (including abandonment) and, in China and a few other countries, of slaughter. Indeed, the protection

of dogs is never justified in the way that the protection of marine turtles or ortolans is. Instead of ensuring the survival of the species, the intention here is to protect each individual member of the dog population, in a way comparable to human rights activists' protection of human lives.⁴

Based on this premise, the threat facing dogs is not that they will disappear from earth but the potential abuses they could be victim to. This particular premise helps determine the criteria for defining which subjects or objects are deserving of protection: one – species, subject, or object – is considered weak when the absence of immediate assistance leads to his/her/its premature death or causes the irremediable degradation of his/her/its future conditions of existence. Concretely, something or someone is weak if an absence of external intervention to protect him/her/it leads to the definitive alteration of his/her/its current state. This simple definition works universally for species, individuals, and cultural practices, as it is neither inherent to the being in question nor necessarily stable. When, as in the case of mistreated pet animals, the threat is external to the object or subject that it weakens, it is only the conditions which the particular object is facing that temporarily turn it into an object to be protected. Thus, it is the prospective consequence of an action or of an absence of action that determines the level of weakness of something, not its nature. Through this definition, both the 'weak' status and the level of emergency can be determined. Simply put, for those considered to be 'weak', time matters. And indeed, this argument is recurrent and frequently used. Mobilizations in the name of others are often framed according to the vocabulary of urgency, which allows them to be given priority, in accordance with the severity of their case.

Socially constructed criteria regarding priority

Noticeably, however, even the criteria of 'emergency' does not provide a very solid basis for discriminating between various 'weak' beings; nor does it explain why some topics generate calls for protection while others are simply ignored. Ultimately, moral and cultural arguments often determine these choices, privileging, for example, the victim considered the most innocent, the most meriting, the most experienced, or simply the closest from any geographical or social perspective. These moral or practical arguments create an understanding of the situation in which some appear more deserving than others – or at least constitute a means of choosing between causes. The resulting decisions are thus considered objective and fair, but they remain based heavily on highly culturally and historically differentiated premises (see Douglas, 1986).

⁴ While the idea generally defended is the acknowledgement of the individual right to live of animals, a right fashioned after human rights, observation demonstrates that the rights defended by animal activists are not fully equivalent. They accept, for example, the legitimacy of sterilizing stray animals, thereby endorsing a form of pragmatism.

This relativity in the evaluation of the weakness of any object or subject is furthered by the evaluation of the consequences of a lack of assistance. Even in cases where such consequences are perfectly foreseeable – a rare occurrence – their impact often remains disputable. If an errant dog is taken off the street and enclosed in a shelter where it will be nurtured and healed, who can ascertain that this life is its preference? Furthermore, in certain cases, some positions of weakness are acknowledged but justified in moral terms, either for political purposes (e.g., preserving the dominance of one's own social group) or on ideological grounds (e.g., social Darwinism, or the idea that weak groups' situation is a fair consequence of previous choices they have made, etc.). However, any protection also results in costs, which thus limit the possibilities for protection. Moral and economic criteria therefore interfere constantly with each other in determining which 'weak' interests should be given priority over others, and whether or not they should be protected. The evaluation process engaged in here requires careful analysis of how the question of what should be protected is socially constructed: by which groups, with which means, and according to which perspectives.

To summarize, we cannot rely on the idea that the category 'weak' is based on an incontestable, inherent quality. We have to follow the process of negotiation through which the assignment of 'weakness' is elaborated, as well as acknowledged or contested. Any position of weakness is constructed according to a process of moral and economic justification that has to be examined. In other words, the subjective construction of objective criteria for determining who most deserves protection is two-sided. It consists of *moral evaluation* on the one hand and the establishment of a *priority evaluation* on the other. In substance, it asks who should be protected, under what circumstances, and in which order. Social actors have a strong influence on the process, through the choice of moral motives they utilize in their protective claims.

A competition in weakness

As one can understand, the ambiguities accompanying the attribution of protection to certain beings do not simply disappear when we deconstruct certain people's decisions to protect something. Observing the politics within which the creation of a particular social and legal status for dogs is wrapped up cannot deconstruct the fact that pet dogs only exist in relation to human owners, from whose perspective they are weak and require protection. That this status and its extent has varied over time and continues to vary between societies does not change the fact that pet dogs only exist as a category from the perspective of a relationship that constitutes them as such, and consequently maintains them, at least nominally, as dependent.

Similarly, many of the social groups considered 'weak' or 'vulnerable' are somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity, with neither perspective doing them complete justice. Their

status and the choices made concerning them are neither entirely objective nor fully relative. We can, however, examine how the moral and political economy behind the representations of weak groups is constructed. Examining how the question of protection has historically been constructed in a certain social environment and a particular context of power relationships does not imply that the idea of ‘weak’ is entirely subjective, but rather that it is so to a very large and non-systematized extent.

In this regard, determining which weak entity is ‘the least advantaged’ (Weatherford, 1983) and deserves more protection is hardly a neutral question. Any group considered to be disadvantaged finds itself in competition with other groups equally considered as such. The concerns and mobilizations in the name of dogs in China are not immune from this competition, and the protection of dogs could be considered to infringe upon at least three other possible ‘weak’ domains of concern:

1) ‘Weak’ individuals: While the protection of companion animals might be considered to first become necessary when these animals are left by their previous owners or neglected by their current ones, these same animals may equally be seen as representing a threat to human beings. Uncontrolled dogs are often perceived as potential attackers, dangerous for children or for vulnerable people. They are also seen as potential vectors of disease. In such cases, it could easily be argued that their eradication, rather than their protection, is required. In China, this is generally the view held by the state, which promotes the elimination of stray dogs or tries to control them in cities by limiting their number to one per family and forbidding larger dogs.

2) ‘Weak’ social classes: More controversially, the protection of animals might also be considered as competing with the interests of the people who ‘mistreat’ or ‘exploit’ them. Petty pet businesses, pet robbery by socially disadvantaged people trying to extract economic profit or even food from their meat, and the over-exploitation of work animals (in farms, industry, or the security industry, where dogs may be beaten up or used continuously in day and night shifts, etc.) are all cases where the well-being of humans and of animals is in competition.⁵ Giving precedence to the animal’s life might in some cases imply limiting human beings’ mode of subsistence, and thus possibly endangering their survival. Interestingly, this view is rarely defended by anyone except those

⁵ In nineteenth-century Europe, the emergence of calls for the protection of animals clearly developed in tandem with the maximization of their employment in industry. Such calls were consequently supported by patrons against their own employees, who were using the animals they were in charge of beyond the limits they could bear in order to save their own energy (Traïni, 2011).

considered by animal activists to be the offenders, when the latter attempt to defend their view by insisting that ‘it is just a dog’.⁶

3) ‘Weak’ culture: The opposition between animal rights and cultural heritage can be encountered everywhere in the world. Bullfighting in south-western Europe, whale fishing in Japan, dolphin grinds in the Faroe Islands, and Inuit seal hunting are famous examples. While some of these practices are also defended on the basis of commercial interests or species regulation, cultural arguments are often at the forefront of the opposition to pro-animal movements. In China, the use of tiger bones or bears’ bile in traditional Chinese medicine is justified by some on the grounds that it defends national interests by protecting China’s ‘traditional’ medicine against Western medicine’s biomedical hegemony (see Li, 2006). A similar logic may apply when the categorization of some animals as ‘companions’ rather than as ‘eatable/consumable/usable’ means opposing traditional consumption practices (e.g., eating) or uses (e.g., animal labour, fighting dogs, religious sacrifices, etc.) of other members of the same species. In addition, in China, the cultural aspect of the affection for pet dogs that could be seen as the most threatening is that it represents the ‘Westernization’ of younger generations and, as such, a threat to a certain reified idea of ‘Chinese culture’.

These competing interests demonstrate how mobilizations in the name of ‘companion animals’ are controversial and are occasionally questioned. Efforts at animal protection are often entangled with issues of social inequality, where status determines the importance of one’s life, and where some lives (including those of animals) are privileged over others (including those of humans). Pet protection can be enforced very differently depending on the owners’ backgrounds. Similarly, the ‘weak’ interest of cultural heritage might be further weakened by the adoption of a Westernized perception of ‘pets’ by international elites, in opposition to the weaker positions of a much less ‘international’ population, which defends what it considers to be culturally inherited practices.

The moral motives behind protection

Designating ‘objective’ criteria for a sort of incontestable ‘weakness’ hardly explains why certain interests and not others are chosen for protection. The Yulin festival’s dogs might be in immediate danger of slaughter, but such is the case for numerous other animals, about which the same activists do not necessarily express similar concerns. Clearly, the objectivity of weaknesses plays only a mi-

⁶ Known as anthropocentrism or human species-ism, this view is famously supported in China by a university professor named Zhao Nanyuan, who argues that calls for animal protection are both against Chinese culture and anti-human (see Li, 2006).

nor role in the social definition of which subjects require protection. The question is more about which ‘weak’ interests we are concerned about, among all the possible candidates. This is precisely the answer another companion-animal activist in Tangshan gave me when I asked him how he had chosen the animal species he was caring for in his shelter: ‘affection’ (*xihuan*), he answered blatantly, while suddenly blushing. This does not mean, however, that the potential candidates for protection are strictly limited, as those whom one feels concerned about can change immensely from one time and one place to another. But in addition to urgency, we can expect geographical proximity and social closeness to have an important influence.

Though the determination of which ‘weak’ entity should receive protection is subject to dispute, the idea of providing assistance to the weakest is hardly ever totally contested.⁷ However, the way in which such protection should be provided (e.g., through state taxes and social redistribution (empowerment) or through individual goodwill and direct benevolence?) can be very controversial. Even the objective of such assistance is not universally agreed upon, as it can attempt either to fully transform a situation considered unfair or to simply correct some of its negative consequences while preserving the system which generated it (see Allahyari, 2001). In present-day China, the idea that a ‘moral crisis’ is taking place in this non-liberal but newly capitalist-oriented society also calls into question the possibility of assistance itself. Numerous widely covered scandals over the last decade have involved ‘good Samaritans’ being taken advantage of by the victim they were trying to help (Yan, 2009). By contrast, there are many stories about people who have not assisted people in need, or innocent people’s lives being endangered through deliberate malicious practices (Yan, 2012). In this respect, assisting stray dogs appears to be a rather safe behaviour for those frustrated with the risks associated with assisting fellow citizens in present-day China. The case of companion-animal activists thus illuminates the ‘moral crisis’ controversy, as it emphasizes the importance of pity and empathy in today’s China, a society often viewed as morally indifferent and psychologically weak, if not simply wrong (see Steinmuller and Wu, 2011). The movements for solidarity with dogs, by contrast, call into question the economic and political reasons for the alleged ‘apathy’ of Chinese citizens regarding certain other topics, particularly the provision of assistance to the needy.⁸

Since Tocqueville’s *L’ancien régime et la révolution* (1856), the conditions explaining social and political mobilization have been an important scholarly topic. However, the social motives be-

⁷ Even in the cases of social Darwinism and other neoliberal philosophies according to which either ‘nature’ or ‘the market’ are held responsible for the determination of who should survive, self-determined practices of benevolence are often emphasized.

⁸ Though widespread, these evaluations do not do justice to the mobilizations of all sorts within Chinese society (see O’Brien & Li, 2006, Thireau & Hua, 2010).

hind such mobilization have rarely been examined. Investigating the prioritization of protection for certain groups by analysing the relationship between the so-called ‘weak’ interests and those who intend to protect them, as I offer to do, requires us to question two complementary dimensions: affect and power. Previous research carried out in the United States by James Jasper (1999) and Julian McAllister Groves (2001) and in France by Christophe Traïni (2011) on the emotional and biographical motivations behind individual activists’ mobilizations demonstrate clearly the importance of affects in understanding pro-animal engagement. As I have proposed elsewhere (Pettier, 2016), I maintain that affects are critical information for any ethnography, and in the present case such personal sentimental motives are indeed essential.

However, the reasons behind an individual’s choice to protect certain species of animals are beyond the scope of this article. Rather than searching for what particular conditions or events can explain the triggering of collective mobilization, I inquire into the social relationships implied in the selection of a cause. How can we understand mobilization in the name of others, and the politics behind it? Rather than the affective aspects, I wish to privilege the examination of the power relationships in which such engagements are entangled. My reference to power is based on Foucault’s conception of it as a multidimensional system of forces exercised relationally between various social actors, rather than applied by a single group onto others (Foucault, 1976). For the purpose of this exercise, the dogs themselves, as a group, can be considered an actor in the configuration of power relationships, but one in negotiation with other groups that define it differently. Taking the qualification of a group such as pet dogs as ‘weak’ to be relational and dynamic allows in parallel for a deeper examination of the situation of certain groups who are by nature not able to take part in the debates concerning them (e.g., animals, cultural relics, intangible heritage). If the notion of ‘weak’ is elaborated between groups with various levels of power and capacity, we can understand such ‘weak’ beings as positioned in the middle of relational issues of opposition (and power) involving these groups, which confront each other about the protection of the weak. Thus, such claims for protection in turn raise various questions about the political motives behind them.

No weak without strong

Qualifying a person or group as weak can easily be perceived as derogatory (Holbig & Neckel, 2016), because this qualification denies the objects of the categorization the ability to define themselves and to develop an autonomous political agenda. In the same way that cultural heritage or animals are considered unable to protect their own collective interests by taking part in politics, poor populations, for example, are often considered unable to satisfy the requirements of political representation or to qualify for citizenship. When, as in the case of dogs, the particular group cannot

make its own political claims, its qualification as weak almost certainly implies the existence of third-party groups considered to be offenders, to be shirking responsibility for assistance, or to be 'weak' and unfairly given exaggerated priority. Simply put, the discourses concerning weak groups largely involve political justification processes that tend to become invisible in the name of the common sense, or are instead rationalized in the name of the alleged objectivity of their cause. While I began this discussion by examining ways to objectively measure the vulnerability of any being, the subsequent analysis has revealed that such criteria are subject to constant negotiation, if not controversy. Qualifying a person, group, or object as endangered implies its/their evaluation with reference to other groups who are not so, including the interrelations, the gaps and the links between them. Relative to a group of blind people, a person with a correctly working eye would not be designed as weak, while he would be weak relative to a group of peers with full eyesight. It is only through their reciprocal relationship that strong and weak positions can be evaluated. There can be no 'weak' without 'strong'; nor can there be any weak interest to protect without potential protectors. The relational definition of what is weak and should or should not receive protection implies the coexistence of different levels of ability to protect oneself or others.

Defining the notion of 'weak' as relational consequently displaces the question from who is objectively 'weak' or 'strong' to how these qualifications are constructed and applied. As long as the definition of who or what is weak is relational, it is the process through which a certain number of actors claim the necessity of protection for themselves or for others that is worthy of attention. By defining some interests as 'weak' and in need of protection, the protectors implicitly define others (potentially themselves) as relatively 'stronger'. At the same time, this relationship is not just a two-way interaction between homogeneously 'weak' or 'strong' groups but is multifaceted. Such subdivision in the moral labour of protecting or not protecting the 'weak' can also serve as a foundation for the introduction of a certain good-versus-evil moral divide between the different sides involved in the conflicts around who or what really is 'weak'. As a consequence, by qualifying certain interests as weak, those who engage in this process also distance themselves from other groups of people who (a) don't feel concerned about the well-being or interests of the groups that these advocates describe as weak; (b) are considered responsible for the weaknesses of the 'weak', or as taking part in the exploitation of their weaknesses; or (c) are the so-called 'weak' themselves, regardless of whether they consider themselves as such (and take advantage of this qualification), don't feel concerned by such a label, or even reject it.

In this sense, labelling a group of beings as weak emphasizes the existence of uneven relations of power. It not only politicizes weakness by implying that some (possibly including oneself) are stronger, but it also suggests a distinction from other social groups considered to be the offend-

ers and allows for political questioning on this divide. But as discussed above, calling for the protection of a weak group – such as pet dogs – also implies making a choice between competitors and, potentially, ignoring other weak groups or denying them this quality. Defining what constitutes a weak group can thus be viewed as a political process that is intellectually, morally, and socially elaborated and differentiated. The vocabulary of weakness is hardly neutral. The degree of ‘emergency’ – as well as the degree of ‘innocence’, ‘value’ and ‘priority’ – can always be discussed or contested. Weak, vulnerable, or disadvantaged groups do exist. But they only exist in relation to others, within a configuration of power relationships that imply that other groups are comparatively ‘strong’. The ‘strong’ are the other side of this moral and political elaboration and divide, and their strength is equally relative. They are dependent on the weak to be defined as such. They, too, are only relatively strong.

From the relationship between weak and strong to its background

Examining the case of dog-protection activism in China from this relational perspective, it seems then particularly important to emphasize a central aspect of Chinese pet activists’ discourse: the importance they give to care and love for each other in the Chinese society as a whole. The previously quoted Mrs Chen, who dedicates her energy to the 4,000 animals in her shelter, not only called her shelter the ‘Home of Love Animal Protecting Center’ but also insists on the ever-continuing necessity of care (*àixīn*) as a foundation of any humane society. While she cautiously emphasizes the non-specificity of this timeless need, other activists I met did not take such precautions, directly criticizing Chinese society’s present moral state in this respect. China’s *nouveaux riches*’ culture was explicitly regarded in a very depreciative manner, with statements denouncing the indignity, superficiality and insensibility of valueless riches. Other activists I met expressed a strong disgust about what they considered the insanity of their society more generally, which they often described as ‘psychologically sick’. They condemned the pressure put on children, their education as inhumane competitors rather than respectful and caring citizens, and the carelessness of many of their compatriots concerning existence in general. Dog-protection activists often emphasized the idea that the absence of care for animals can be explained by social factors and that what is missing is a humane education more generally. The notion that progress in improving Chinese animals’ living conditions can only come if human beings’ living conditions also improve was expressed often and with much clarity. In sum, the discourse of animal activists frequently refers to China as a whole, linking the inhumanity of certain practices involving animals to the inhumanity of the society vis-à-vis each of its members.

The chosen cause of these activists, who are often well educated and relatively privileged, thus takes on a rather different meaning. As long as their discourse concerning their society is

mostly depreciative, the animals they fight for appear to them as the tip of a rather frustrating iceberg. They view animals and the mistreatment they endure as a civilizational issue, and they thus engage not only against the miserable culture of petty and valueless capitalism they denounce, and from which they want to distinguish themselves, but also against the state itself, by opposing practices and controls they consider inhumane. To them, it is clear that the low level of respect for animals' lives in China is only a reflection of the low level of respect for life more generally in the country. To quote an animal activist from the coastal city of Xiamen, 'China's problem concerning animals is a problem concerning humans'. He stated that it is humane education they need to promote first if they want to protect animals. Although they act in the name of dogs and dogs' well-being and this is the problem they dedicate their energy and money to, rather than that of human beings, their objectives are somewhat blurred. This should remind us of the previously noted controversy concerning good Samaritans' troubles in China, or the idea that a 'moral crisis' is supposedly occurring in this 'sick' society, as some of them call it.

It is difficult not to notice that the particular object of their attention is specific in that, unlike many possible others, it does not have the power to talk for itself or to take advantage of the help offered. Animals saved from a butcher's knife with which other dogs were killed in front of their eyes minutes earlier can certainly demonstrate subsequent discomfort with and distrust in humans. However, they certainly cannot try to dishonestly extort benefits from their rescuer, as the poor people featured in Yan Yunxiang's research were doing. They also cannot vocalize their story in an autonomous way that is clearly understandable to human beings. Thus, the story of 'the owner who beat him up and threw him from his fourth-floor apartment' – the case of one shelter's handicapped dog – is based on the protector's discourse about it. Defending the cause of dogs in present-day China can thus be understood as displaying one's values, even at a high personal cost, without the risk of being deprived of one's own agenda. What this example thus signals is that identifying a group as weak and calling for its protection have various implications, including indicating oneself as a protector and distinguishing oneself from other social groups considered repulsive. Determining who is weak is a moral gesture with inescapable political and social implications.

Conclusion: Escaping cynicism and thinking relationally of 'weak' and 'strong'

From these observations concerning companion-animal activists in present-day China, we can see that the notion of 'weakness' has three essential characteristics: The conception that certain beings are 'weak' is always (a) idiosyncratic (it is always contingent, relative to a given historical situation, and linked to a personal history); (b) relational (it is always contextually located within a

power configuration on which the evaluation is based); and (c) dynamic (it is not definitive but constantly subject to re-evaluation and transformation, particularly concerning the priority it is given).

These three characteristics (*idiosyncratic, relational, dynamic*) of the definition of weakness are useful in comprehending not only the transformations and contestations that calls for the protection of a group such as pet dogs involve, but also what these calls avoid and why. If weak groups only exist in a the configuration of a relationship with other groups that are considered to be stronger – including groups viewed positively and groups viewed negatively – these characteristics give the concept a very political and dynamic potential. What is interesting, however, is that the relational perspective I have adopted here leads us to define what it is to be ‘strong’ in exactly the same way. If the weak are defined by these three characteristics, then such is the case for the strong as well. If the status of any individual or group as weak or strong is only marginally defined by objective criteria, these statuses are socially framed through relative comparison. Because even an emergency is in competition with other perceived emergencies, there is no evaluative baseline other than the fragmentation of reality according to social status and economic inequality. To be weak, to be a victim, or to be qualified as such is the outcome of a political process. So is being defined, or defining oneself, as strong. Examining the social history of these relational definitions places the focus on the distribution of power. It allows us to reinterpret the uneven distribution of weak and strong sides differently based on a chosen scope: local, regional, or global. At each level, the strong and the weak can take each other’s place and be dynamically redefined.

Having made this point, we cannot avoid noticing that the way we question the priority given to certain beings over others also implies putting these choices under moralistic and political frames. The banal cynicism concerning mobilizations in the name of dogs demonstrates this point sufficiently. Outside of China, outrage concerning this society often focuses on the way animals are supposedly mistreated there. However, it is also occasionally nurtured by the fact that Chinese people would rather mobilize on behalf of animals than protect their political rights. The examination of these activists’ rationales forces us to observe the complexity of the issue, as well as the questions we ask. Who, after all, has the power to inquire into the motives underlying these mobilizations?

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