Current Status of Animal Welfare and Animal Rights in China

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Summary — In the past few years, new social passions have sparked on the Chinese mainland. At the centre of these burgeoning passions is a focus on animal welfare, animal treatment, and even animal rights, by the public and academic sectors. With China’s rapid economic changes and greater access to information from around the world, societal awareness of animal issues is rising very fast. Hastening this paradigm shift were several highly public incidents involving animal cruelty, including exposés on bear bile harvesting for traditional Chinese medicine, the thousands of dogs rescued from China’s meat trade, and the call to boycott shark fin soup and bird nest soup. This article outlines the current status of campaigning by animal advocates in China (specifically the animal rights movement) from three interlinked perspectives: wildlife conservation, companion animal protection, and laboratory animal protection. By reviewing this campaigning, we attempt to present not only the political and social impact of the concept of animal rights, but also the perceptions of, and challenges to, animal rights activities in China.

Key words: animal rights activities, animal welfare, China, laboratory animal protection.

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Introduction

Although ‘animal rights’ and ‘animal welfare’ are terms that may be used by some to mean the same thing, most scholars would agree that the philosophies of animal rights are not interchangeable with those of animal welfare. Animal welfare has been defined as how well an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives (1). It is measured by several indicators, including behaviour, physiology, longevity, and reproduction (2). Animal rights, however, is predicated on the idea that the rights of non-human and human animals are, basically, the same (3, 4). In China, the nuanced differences between animal welfare and animal rights are difficult to understand, because these foreign concepts were introduced into mainland China only in the early 1990s. However, animal welfare, rather than animal rights, has attracted more media attention in recent years. The Chinese media, and especially social media, have significantly increased their coverage of animal cruelty incidents. Furthermore, some international forums on animal welfare have been held in mainland China. These meetings have attracted many scholars and activists from across the world, and have increased Chinese societal attention to the plight of animals, to the point that the discussion of animal welfare has evolved significantly.

Compared with animal welfare, the philosophy of animal rights was introduced to mainland China when a Chinese translation of Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation was published in Taiwan in the mid-1990s (5). In 1993, the concept was enriched by Tongjin Yang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), in an article entitled The animal rights theory and the eco-centric arguments (6). This was arguably the first comprehensive expatiation of information regarding the origin, arguments, and counter-arguments of animal rights in China. Since then, animal welfare and animal rights ideas have attracted more attention, and more controversy. Some scholars have emphasised that it is high time that the question of animal rights was discussed in China (7). In contrast, other scholars, represented by Nanyuan Zhao, a Tsinghua University professor, put forward arguments such as The essence of animal rights arguments is anti-humanity, or Animal rights is just moral abduction (8). These arguments, whether correct or not, are part of the reason why the new social activism about animals has sparked on the Chinese mainland in recent years.

This animal activism has been accelerated by many international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have begun to operate on the Chinese mainland, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). Most noticeably, several domestic organisations have been established in the last few