

# Chinese University Students' Attitudes Toward the Ethical Treatment and Welfare of Animals

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An important step in ensuring ethical animal treatment and welfare is to understand people's attitudes toward them. However, research is lacking from some Asian countries, such as China. This needs improvement. In this study I asked Chinese university students about their attitudes toward animal welfare issues. The students reported strong concern for the treatment of animals across a broad spectrum of issues, although the level of concern varied according to the issue. The results are in agreement with recent research showing that Chinese society displays generally positive attitudes and behaviors toward animal welfare initiatives. This study, combined with previous work reported in the literature, suggests that the Chinese public is perhaps philosophically ready to accept and support the urgent changes needed to improve animal welfare standards in their country.

An important step in improving animal welfare is to understand people's attitudes toward it. Research in Western countries during the past 30 years has revealed a marked increase in public concern for the ethical treatment of animals, although the use of animals in society remains controversial (Baird & Rosenbaum, 1991; Kellert, 1996; Singer, 2005). Despite an emerging body of research, studies from some countries, such as China, are far less evident. This situation is unfortunate because animal welfare standards there do not match those of their Western counterparts; urgent improvement is needed.

China, a country with both a high human and livestock population, has been criticized for poor animal treatment. Reports about animal cruelty in the country are common and have even led to calls from prominent figures to boycott goods

made there (Addison, 2005; Shuxian, Li, & Su, 2005). Some acts of animal cruelty are shocking and include the following:

1. Animals at markets crammed into small cages without food and water.
2. Animals skinned alive.
3. The use of small animals as shooting targets.
4. Bear farming (extracting bile from an open stomach wound).
5. Consumption of endangered wildlife.
6. Meat cut from live animals to meet customers' orders.
7. The purchase of live animals by zoo visitors to feed to captive tigers (Shuxian et al., 2005).

Although some regulations have existed since 1950, legislation in China concerning animal treatment and welfare is currently limited, even though animal advocates and legislators argue that it is needed urgently (Li, 2004b; Mang, 2002, Shuxian et al. 2005). In 2004, the Chinese government suspended its planned law to regulate the conditions of animals being transported and facing slaughter. The reasons included concerns that the legislation would be impractical and unenforceable and would have a negative impact on businesses, such as factory farming, associated with animal use (Li, 2004b; Shuxian et al., 2005).

The situation is not all doom and gloom, however, as there have been some positive, recent changes, including some protection rights for animals used in research and current consideration by the government of new animal welfare laws. Slow progress is being made in other areas as well, including measures to improve the status for animals bred in captivity, the establishment of more wildlife conservation centers, and regulation of animal circus performances (Wang, 2006). There is regular collaboration between Chinese organizations and international animal welfare and conservation organizations, including the International Fund for Animals' Welfare (IFAW), the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the World Wildlife Fund. For example, China's branch of IFAW collaborates with government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, participates in campaigns and activities to reduce commercial exploitation of animals, protects wildlife habitats, and assists animals in distress (Li, 2004a).

The picture just painted could suggest that the Chinese public has low appreciation for ethical animal treatment and welfare, but recent research has shown otherwise. Studies show that the Chinese public is concerned about the treatment of animals (Clifton, 2000; Davey, Henzi, & Higgins, 2005; MORI, 2005; Shuxian et al., 2005). For example, Shuxian et al. (2005) surveyed Chinese college students' attitudes toward the treatment of animals and found that the majority of students expressed empathy toward animals and opposed animal cruelty. More than 90% reported that animals and their welfare deserve respect and consideration and supported the work of animal protection and welfare organizations.

Recently, IFAW commissioned a public survey in China (MORI, 2005), and the majority of respondents (90%) said they believed they had a moral duty to minimize animal suffering. Responses were broadly similar (91%) to those of the British public (MORI, 2005). Moreover, the majority of respondents (77%) stated they would like to see legislation to minimize animal suffering. In an earlier survey by IFAW in 1998, a high percentage of the sample said they believed that animals have the capacity to experience pain and emotions such as happiness and sadness (Clifton, 2000; Shuxian et al., 2005).

Although research from China is beginning to emerge, it remains limited. Further studies are needed to probe people's attitudes toward a wider range of issues and to determine whether previous findings generalize. In this article, I report a preliminary and exploratory survey of Chinese university students' attitudes toward animal treatment and welfare. The issues include the use of animals in sport, medical research, circuses, cosmetics testing, cock fighting, and the use of wild animals for fur coats.

## METHOD

The research took place in Guangzhou City, the capital of Guangdong Province in south China. The city is one of the most important in south China in terms of foreign trade and investment. Questionnaires were administered to 297 Chinese undergraduate students (foreign language majors ages 18 to 22 years) in classrooms at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. The research was conducted in March 2006.

The Animal Attitude Scale (Herzog et al., 1991) was used to measure attitudes toward the use of animals in society and animal welfare issues. The scale consists of 20 items that are answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*); total scale scores range from 100 to 20, and a high scale score indicates pro-animal welfare attitudes. Items include the following:

1. It is morally wrong to hunt wild animals just for sport.
2. I do not think there is anything wrong with using animals in medical research.
3. I sometimes get upset when I see wild animals in cages at zoos.

Previous use of the scale has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ; Herzog et al., 1991).

The back-translation technique was used to produce a Chinese version of the questionnaire. In this process, a Chinese scholar who had mastered the English language translated the questionnaire into Chinese, and then another native Chinese translated the Chinese version scale back into English; the back-translated

version was compared with the original English version to ensure that items were not misunderstood.

## RESULTS

The university students were asked to rate their response (on a 5-point Likert scale) to 20 statements about the treatment of animals. Individual student responses to the 20 statements were averaged to calculate a scale score for each student; they ranged from 58 to 87 in the sample, and the mean score was 73. The frequency distribution (see Figure 1) shows that most scores were between 70 and 76. This shows that most students reported concern for overall appropriate animal use and welfare.

To understand students' responses toward specific animal welfare issues, the group's mean response (mean scale score) for each statement was analyzed (see Table 1). The analysis showed that students agreed with some statements but were undecided about others (see Table 1). Scores ranged from 2.85 to 4.23, and the overall group score (3.65) represents moderate concern. The three issues that received most concern were (a) hunting wild animals for sport (4.23), (b) the slaughter of whales and dolphins (4.06), and (c) keeping wild animals in zoos (4.01). However, students seemed undecided on issues such as hunting wild animals for food (3.12), whether setting aside more land for wildlife is more important than economic growth (2.99), and using animals in medical research (2.85). Further examination of Table 1 shows that although a 5-point Likert scale was used, most re-

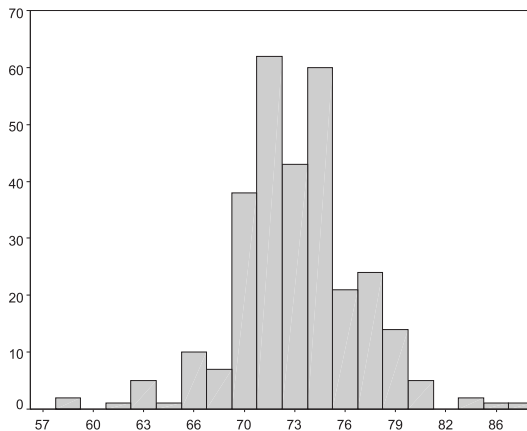


FIGURE 1 Frequency distribution of students' individual Animal Attitude Scale Scores ( $N = 297$ ). The lowest score was 58, and the highest was 87 (range: 29).

TABLE 1  
Chinese University Students' Concerns About the Ethical Treatment of Animals

<i>Issues Concerned With the Ethical Treatment of Animals</i>	<i>% of Sample</i>					
	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>M</i>
1. It is morally wrong to hunt wild animals just for sport. <sup>a</sup>	43	42	11	3	1	4.23
2. I do not think that there is anything wrong with using animals in medical research. <sup>a</sup>	0	3	31	62	4	3.66
3. There should be extremely stiff penalties, including jail sentences, for people who participate in cock-fighting.	8	50	41	1	0	3.64
4. The skins of wild animals should not be made into fur coats.	27	47	24	2	0	3.99
5. There is nothing morally wrong with hunting wild animals for food. <sup>a</sup>	0	27	40	28	5	3.12
6. I think people who object to raising animals for meat are too sentimental. <sup>a</sup>	0	9	34	50	7	3.55
7. Much of the scientific research done with animals is unnecessary and cruel.	6	33	55	6	0	3.39
8. I think it is perfectly acceptable for cattle to be raised for human consumption. <sup>a</sup>	0	1	19	72	8	3.86
9. Basically, humans have the right to use animals as we see fit. <sup>a</sup>	0	3	21	67	9	3.83
10. The slaughter of whales and dolphins should be immediately stopped even if it means some people will be put out of work.	29	52	16	3	0	4.06
11. I sometimes get upset when I see wild animals in cages at zoos.	18	66	15	1	0	4.01
12. In general, I think that human economic gain is more important than setting aside more land for wildlife. <sup>a</sup>	0	24	56	17	3	2.99
13. Too much fuss is made over the welfare of animals these days when there are many problems that need to be solved. <sup>a</sup>	0	3	25	60	12	3.80
14. Breeding animals for their skins is a legitimate use of animals. <sup>a</sup>	0	11	45	41	3	3.36
15. Some aspects of biology can only be learned through dissecting preserved animals. <sup>a</sup>	0	4	42	49	5	3.54
16. Continued research with animals will be necessary if we are to ever conquer diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and AIDS. <sup>a</sup>	0	4	16	71	9	2.85
17. It is unethical to breed purebred dogs for pets when millions of dogs are killed in animal shelters yearly.	2	39	55	4	0	3.39

*(continued)*

TABLE 1 Continued

<i>Issues Concerned With the Ethical Treatment of Animals</i>	<i>% of Sample</i>					
	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>M</i>
18. The production of inexpensive meat, eggs, and dairy products justifies maintaining animals in crowded conditions. <sup>a</sup>	0	7	57	33	3	3.32
19. The use of animals such as rabbits for testing the safety of cosmetics and household products is unnecessary and should be stopped.	10	59	28	3	0	3.77
20. The use of animals in circuses is cruel.	12	45	41	2	0	3.68

*Note.* Items were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*), 4 (*agree*), 3 (*undecided*), 2 (*disagree*), to 1 (*strongly disagree*). The overall group score was 3.65.

<sup>a</sup>These items marked were reversed scored.

sponses were either 4 (*agree*) or 3 (*undecided*); this means that none of the mean scores represent disagreement with any of the statements because students either agreed with, or were undecided about, the issues.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated Chinese university students' attitudes about animal treatment and welfare issues. Students expressed strong overall concern for ethical animal treatment, although the level of concern varied according to the issue. This finding is in agreement with previous research that has demonstrated positive attitudes and behaviors in China toward animal treatment and welfare (Davey et al., 2005; MORI, 2005; Shuxian et al. 2005). For example, a recent survey of university students (Shuxian et al., 2005) and the public (MORI, 2005) in China revealed that a high percentage are concerned about animal treatment and suffering. That young people express strong concern is promising, because attitudes often are related to behavior. Today's students are tomorrow's workforce who will work with animals, including political and business leaders who will make decisions about animal welfare.

A paradox that needs to be addressed, however, is the inconsistency of self-reported concern for animal welfare and the poor animal treatment in society. Further investigation is needed to explain this difference. Suggested explanations include the following:

1. Complexity surrounding the moral status of animal use in society (expression of concern for animals is not necessarily reflected in behavior).

2. Cultural differences between East and West, as the Eastern affinity toward the natural world is actually highly restricted because respect and appreciation is often restricted to particular species.
3. Reported cases of animal cruelty in China are extreme examples that do not represent the public's overall attitudes toward animals (Kellert, 1993, 1996; Herzog, Rowan, & Kossow, 2001).

When discussing animal welfare in China, it is important to point out that animal welfare, as a science, originated in the West when the first Protection of Animals Act was passed in the United Kingdom in 1911, and it developed alongside scientific and technological advances. It is a relatively new phenomenon in China and obviously at an early stage in its development. China is a developing country that has different issues and priorities—particularly concerning human health and poverty—from Western countries. Even so, the problems of animal treatment and welfare in China urgently need to be addressed. As Song (2004) stated, “animal welfare is in a subordinate position in the Chinese legal system, which is by no means optimistic” (p. 424). It is time for a change, and more legislation and enforcement of that legislation are needed. Although there has been some progress to protect the rights of animals used in research (Ministry of Agriculture, 2006; Wang, 2006), it is only a first step.

The findings of this study, along with previous research, suggest that Chinese society is concerned about animal welfare and ready to accept the improvements needed. Some other Asian countries have animal welfare laws to protect animals; for example, India has one of the oldest animal welfare laws, formed in 1960; Taiwan has a strict, comprehensive law to protect animals; the Philippines established an Animal Welfare Act in 1998; and Singapore passed a new bill in 2002 that increases the penalty for animal cruelty (G. Agoramoorthy, personal communication; Agoramoorthy, 2004; Favre & Hall, 2004). These policies and their enforcement could serve as a model to be followed in China to improve welfare standards.

It is very likely that the sample type (a small sample of urban university students) influenced the findings. Because animal welfare science is a new phenomenon in China, it is possible that members of the younger generation surveyed in this study are more aware of it. Because of the country's recent economic development, these students grew up with better material conditions and education opportunities than did older members of society, and therefore they may have more knowledge of animal welfare and stronger concerns than do older people. In other words, because of the bias associated with the student sample, the attitudes reported in this study may not necessarily represent the views of older people and, therefore, society. There are other limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. This study was conducted in an affluent city in which residents' living standards are comparatively higher than in other areas in China (China Statistical Yearbook, 2004). Therefore, the findings may not necessarily

generalize to other locations; indeed, previous research has shown variation in the Chinese public's responses toward animals, according to demographic factors such as rural–urban residency and ethnicity (Davey & Higgins, 2005). Future research can focus on variation in attitudes across different demographic groups. It is important also to note that the prevalence of public surveys in China is less common in the West, and this may have influenced how people answered questions. Chinese respondents may have hesitated to answer truthfully, the questions might have been considered intrusive, or answers may have been reported on the basis of what people think they should report. Further research is needed to explore these concerns.

Despite this study's limitations, the findings it revealed are important and encouraging. There is an urgent need to improve animal treatment and welfare in China, and the first step is public support. This study, along with other research, suggests that Chinese society is concerned about animal welfare and perhaps is philosophically ready to accept and support the improvements needed in the country. It is hoped that this study will encourage further work about the topic in China and other Asian countries.

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