

Regulating Urban Companion Dogs in China During Covid-19:

When Pandemic Meets Panic

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ABSTRACT: As society develops and public concern for animal protection grows, the perception and value of dogs is changing in China. In recent years, an increasing number of citizens have kept dogs for companionship and emotional support and have become concerned with the well-being of dogs. Despite changes in the perception of the place of dogs in Chinese society, the legal status of dogs has remained unchanged. Without the proper legal protection, dogs in China run numerous risks. In particular, as the novel coronavirus outbreak spread globally with devastating effects on human health, countless animals have become victims of “pandemic panic.” The Covid-19 pandemic affected animal ethics and the human-animal relationship, which underwent significant changes. By tracking the evolution of policies on companion animal management, this study explores the current living conditions of companion animals in China, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as social attitudes towards urban animal companions.

KEYWORDS: urban companion dogs, zoonotic diseases, Covid-19, pandemic, dog ban policies, dog control, China.

Introduction

On 31 December 2019, China alerted the World Health Organisation (WHO) regarding a cluster of unusual cases of pneumonia diagnosed in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, Hubei Province. Given the rapidity of the global spread of the virus, the Covid-19 outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. To date, more than 775 million cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection were confirmed worldwide, and 7,053,524 people have died of Covid-19.¹

While the Covid-19 outbreak has had adverse impacts on health systems and economic stability throughout the world, it also had undesirable ramifications for animal welfare (Zou 2023). For example, at the epicentre of the outbreak in Wuhan, numerous pet owners were forced to leave their pets behind when authorities evacuated people from their homes for quarantine and isolation. Animal welfare organisation in China have estimated that in Wuhan alone, twenty thousand companion animals were left behind in homes during that period.² Although the owners left sufficient food and water for their pets for a few days, they returned much later than they originally expected; consequently, most such pets starved to death. The incidents that occurred in Wuhan are only the tip of the iceberg; similar events occurred in many other cities in China, including Beijing, Dalian, and Xi'an, because pets were not allowed to quarantine with their owners and very few official shelters

were set up to temporarily take care of these animals.³ During the Covid-19 pandemic, animals were more vulnerable than ever, particularly when their welfare was perceived as being counter to the interests of human beings (Zhu 2020).

Animal welfare is a foreign concept introduced into Mainland China in the early 1990s (Li 2008; Carpenter and Song 2016). At that time, from a public perspective, attention to animal welfare was a relatively new issue in China (Li 2006). In this regard, animal-related laws and ordinances passed in the early 1980s and 1990s were completely silent on issues of animal cruelty (ibid.).⁴ This situation eventually changed: animal protection has experienced significant developments in recent decades, and animal welfare legislation has

1. “WHO Covid-19 dashboard,” World Health Organisation, <https://covid19.who.int> (accessed on 25 July 2024).
2. “主人因新冠去世，180天後它還在等待” (Zhuren yin xinguan qushi, 180 tian hou ta haizai dengdai, The owner died because of Covid-19, 180 days later, it [the pet] is still waiting for him), Wuhan Small Animal Protection Association (武漢市小動物保護協會), 9 September 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0jx1mpbs-IGDX41pra3QUQ> (accessed on 1 August 2024).
3. Allen Kim, “Cats and Dogs Abandoned at the Start of the Coronavirus Outbreak are Now Starving or Being Killed,” CNN, 15 March 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/15/asia/coronavirus-animals-pets-trnd/index.html> (accessed on 3 April 2022).
4. See, for example: 家犬管理条例 (Jiaquan guanli tiaoli, Regulations on pet dogs), enacted in November 1980; 中华人民共和国野生动物保护法 (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo yesheng dongwu baohu fa, Wild Animals Protection Law of the People's Republic of China), passed in 1988.

become the focal point of discussions on animal welfare (Littlefair 2012; Meng et al. 2012; Cao 2015; Pan 2016; Su and Martens 2017). However, China's animal-related legislation continues to come under criticism (Li 2006). Firstly, China has few animal welfare laws, and these laws are primarily focused on protecting human interests in relation to the use and conservation of valuable animal resources. Animal welfare issues and how animals are treated are of secondary concern (Cao 2015). Secondly, existing Chinese laws do not provide protection to all relevant animals. They only offer limited protection to endangered species or creatures deemed valuable to economic or scientific research, while most animals fall outside of the protection of any laws (Shi 2020). Thirdly, animal cruelty is not explicitly defined in Chinese legislation (Cao 2013). Fourthly, the articles of existing laws are mostly stated as principles but have weak implementation in practice (Li 2006). With a lack of effective protection, the welfare of animals remains vulnerable in China (Li 2021). The existing literature on animal welfare in China overwhelmingly emphasises the legislative framework (Song 2006; Carpenter and Song 2016), abusive practices (Cao 2015; Brown 2018), and cultural origins (Li and Davey 2013; Cao 2020). Little research discusses animal welfare and the human-animal relationship from a sociopolitical perspective, uncovers the dynamics in public perceptions of animals, or explores how public health issues impact public attitudes towards animals and change the living conditions and social status of animals.

To fill this gap, this paper explores how the Covid-19 epidemic changed the living conditions of pets in China and outlines a few of the ways in which it has impacted their welfare, both positively and negatively. The ethics of the human-animal relationship are complex because this relationship is not immutable. Certain societal, political, and economic changes have inevitably transformed the public perception of companion animals and reshaped their living conditions in society. To better understand the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of China's society, this paper critically compares the living conditions of companion animals and their relationship with human beings during Covid-19 and previous epidemics.

An authoritarian regime's response to crisis: The current pandemic and previous practices

The Covid-19 pandemic is merely the latest in a series of zoonotic diseases that China has actively fought. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, the 2003 SARS epidemic was the first alarming zoonotic outbreak of the twenty-first century to challenge Chinese people. First identified in Guangdong Province, it eventually spread to more than two dozen countries in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. China was hit particularly hard, as it was home to over half the world's approximately 8,400 cases, while almost another quarter occurred in Hong Kong (Zhan 2006). The 2003 SARS outbreak highlighted the prevalence and power of zoonotic disease, which breaks the assumed barrier between humans and nonhumans. It is estimated that among the 1,600 known human pathogens, over 60% are zoonotic, while among emerging diseases, the percentage is 75% (Tomley and Martin 2009).

The threat of zoonotic contagion has become a growing concern, particularly since the SARS and Covid-19 outbreaks. Recent waves

of zoonotic diseases have focused much greater global attention on infectious diseases that can be transmitted between species, namely from animals to humans, which has placed the human-animal relationship in the spotlight. For example, countless pets in China were killed because it was feared they were a source of contagion during the SARS and Covid-19 pandemics.⁵ Notably, the social changes that have taken place during such pandemics have had a significant impact on the living conditions of animals in China, reshaping the human-animal relationship from numerous perspectives. In essence, the ethics of the human-animal relationship are indeed complex and entangled with a wide range of factors, including ideology, policy, customs, social values, culture, and religion.

In particular, during the harsh enforcement of the zero-Covid policy, it was not easy to keep a family pet healthy and safe. The zero-Covid policy is a public health policy that was implemented by a few countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast to the "living with Covid-19 strategy" (Ho, Hussain, and Sparagano 2021), it has a pattern of control and maximises suppression. The zero-Covid policy was first proposed and enforced in the aftermath of the Wuhan outbreak in early 2020, with Wuhan being put under 76 days of mass lockdown, mass testing, intense surveillance, isolation, quarantines, and border closures.⁶ After a critical battle was won by defending Wuhan and Hubei against Covid-19, the zero-Covid policy was believed to be the most effective and economical approach⁷: it was therefore continually deployed during the subsequent waves of regional outbreaks in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, among other places.⁸ At the time, grassroots leaders and frontline officials were under extreme pressure to prevent any outbreaks from spreading beyond their area of control (Zhou and Lian 2020). In this regard, they proposed initiatives as part of the regulatory practice that were intended to help cope with the associated challenges and political missions. Such initiatives functioned as a double-edged sword regarding pet management, creating both risks and opportunities.

Wars on epidemics: Regular patterns and emerging changes

During the SARS and Covid-19 epidemics, pets repeatedly became victims of pandemic panic. Despite a lack of scientific evidence that pet dogs and cats could transmit the virus or even

5. Jim Yardley, "The SARS Scare in China: Slaughter of the Animals," *The New York Times*, 7 January 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/07/world/the-sars-scare-in-china-slaughter-of-the-animals.html> (accessed on 26 November 2022).
6. J. Stephen Morrison, Scott Kennedy, and Yanzhong Huang, "China's Zero-Covid: What Should the West Do?," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-zero-covid-what-should-west-do> (accessed on 28 May 2024).
7. Chen Fang 陳芳, Dong Ruifeng 董瑞豐, Peng Yunjia 彭韻佳, Gu Tiancheng 顧天成, and Yang Siqi 楊思琪, "中國'動態清零'焦點觀察" (*Zhongguo "dongtai qingling" jiaodian guancha*, Focus on China's "zero-covid strategy"), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 10 April 2022, www.news.cn/2022-04/10/c_1128547547.htm (accessed on 30 November 2022).
8. Vivian Wang and Joy Dong, "Near-daily Covid Tests, Sleeping in Classrooms: Life in Covid-zero China," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/05/world/asia/china-coronavirus-ruli.html> (accessed on 28 May 2024).

develop the associated coronavirus diseases, the public feared that pets might play a role in spreading diseases, resulting in mass abandonment and culls. In addition to pet owners' self-oriented choices during the epidemics, the authorities' attitude and management policies regarding pets significantly impacted pets' status and living conditions.⁹

Regarding pet management, similar regulatory approaches were adopted in the wars against SARS and Covid-19. "Special action" (*tebie xingdong* 特別行動) was one of the most important remedies employed by the authorities when ordinary practice failed to meet urgent needs; however, more recent regulatory practice has certain features that were not present in earlier regulations. By studying such new trends in pet management practice, this paper explores the possible reasons for such changes.

This research is primarily based on data collected in fieldwork investigations in City Q, in eastern China. The fieldwork for this research was conducted between March 2023 and June 2023. The data collected for this paper mainly consist of two elements. The first component of data collection consisted of interviews conducted with police officers and enforcement officers.¹⁰ This helps to deepen scholarly understanding of the mindset of law enforcement officers in China, study the ideas (e.g., environmental, organisational, and job factors, as well as human and individual characteristics) underlying enforcement decisions, and determine the extent to which such factors could affect the law. The second component of data collection includes government notices and documents. Analysis of these official notices and documents provides us with a better understanding of regulatory dynamics and the authorities' attitudes towards the pets.

Changes and continuities in the format and language of pet bans

In 2003, outbreaks of SARS were associated with considerable fear among the public. To control and mitigate the spread of the virus, regional governments issued formal notices and documents to tighten the regulation of various aspects of civil life.¹¹ Of these, pet management was perceived as one of the most important regarding infectious disease control. Many authorities enforced blanket bans on pets, thereby preventing residents from sharing common areas with their animals, and increased restrictions on dog walking and other outdoor activities.¹² Among these documents, those including key words such as "cull," "kill," or "destroy" (*busha* 捕殺) were classified as "dog beating orders" (*dagou ling* 打狗令).¹³ Many cities were sent official documents and notices to launch crackdowns on both stray and domesticated animals, particularly dogs. For example, Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province, was one of the first cities to announce an official "dog beating order" on 8 March 2003: dogs were banned from streets, parks, and other public places, including public transportation, outdoor areas of residential apartment blocks, and shared lifts in condominiums; if the order was disobeyed, the authorities confiscated or killed the animals without notice. If it was necessary to take dogs out in public, they had to be adequately restrained and travel inside a private vehicle.¹⁴ On 4 May 2003, Nanjing Public Security Bureau announced the beginning of a special crackdown on dogs. From that date onwards, dog owners

were no longer allowed to take their dogs for walks, and registration was necessitated for all domestic dogs.¹⁵

Similar pet ban orders were employed in Yinchuan, the capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Beginning on 5 April 2003, pet owners in Yinchuan City were forbidden to bring dogs into public areas; thereafter, the Urban Administration and Law Enforcement Bureau, working jointly with the Public Security Bureau, launched an action against pet markets on 26 April 2003. According to an interview with an official reported in 2003, "Although the number of pet dogs killed is not huge [fewer than ten in three days], the effectiveness of the action is outstanding."¹⁶ Pet markets were urged to close, and more than 5,000 notices were posted all over the streets of the city (e.g., on the walls of the community committee buildings, residential areas, and even back alleys) to emphasise the significant role of pets in SARS transmission. Pet owners bringing their pets into public places would be fined, and their pets would be seized or killed. As a result of this wave of the crackdown, citizens were taught to understand the danger of keeping pets and told that this was a

9. Author's interview with police officers and law enforcement officers, April 2023. As policeman Zhu indicated, the authorities' attitude, particularly the leader's attitude, plays a significant role in dog regulation, which, in effect, serves as the prevailing principle for law enforcement. As such, the attitude of local authorities predominantly determines the living conditions of dogs in each city.

10. Through the introduction of a government official, the author was allowed to conduct interviews with 23 police officers and urban management officials. The interviews were mainly conducted on a one-to-one basis, while on one occasion a collective interview was conducted involving the joint participation of eight interviewees. Names and other identifiers were anonymised to protect the interviewees involved and to put their minds at ease.

11. See, for example: People's Government of Jincheng Municipality 晉城市人民政府, "晉城市傳染性非典型肺炎應急預案" (*Jinchengshi chuanranxing feidianxing feiyan yingji yu'an*, Jincheng municipality on issuing the emergency response plan for contagious severe acute respiratory syndrome), 12 October 2003, https://xxgk.jcgov.gov.cn/jcsrmz/zc/jszi/202101/t20210121_1343055.shtml (accessed on 22 July 2024); People's Government of Beijing Municipality 北京市人民政府, "北京市實施傳染性非典型肺炎預防控制措施若干規定" (*Beijingshi shishi chuanranxing feidianxing feiyan yufang kongzhi cuoshi ruogan guiding*, Several provisions of Beijing municipality for implementing measures of prevention and control of contagious severe acute respiratory syndrome), 28 May 2003, https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzdzwz/200308/t20030807_134378.html (accessed on 22 July 2024).

12. See, for example: People's Government of Nanjing Municipality 南京市人民政府, "南京市犬類管理辦法" (*Nanjingshi quanlei guanli banfa*, Regulations of Nanjing municipality on dog management), 20 September 2001, <http://asianlii.org/ch/cn/legis/js/laws/434579cd75d474119c3651e4fc61ace097bd6972/> (accessed on 22 July 2024); Standing Committee of Wuhan Municipal People's Congress 武漢市人民代表大會常務委員會, "武漢市養犬管理條例" (*Wuhanshi yangquan guanli tiaoli*, Regulations of Wuhan municipality on dog management), 1 May 2006, <https://gaj.wuhan.gov.cn/yqwx/assets/flfgxq9.html> (accessed on 22 July 2024); People's Government of Changsha Municipality 長沙市人民政府, "長沙市城市養犬管理規定" (*Changshashi chengshi yangquan guanli guiding*, Provisions of Changsha municipality on dog management in urban areas), 1 May 2006, https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzdzwz/200609/t20060928_136215.html (accessed on 22 July 2024).

13. Tang Nan 唐楠, "城市養狗" (*Chengshi yanggou*, Keeping a dog in the city), *The People's Public Security Newspaper* (人民公安報), 11 July 2003.

14. "南京率先頒布'打狗令'" (*Nanjing shuaixian banbu "dagou ling"*, The promulgation of "dog ban" in Nanjing), *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年報), 19 May 2003, <https://news.sina.cn/sa/2003-05-19/detail-ikkntiak7351656.d.html> (accessed on 30 November 2022).

15. Chen Feng 陳峰, "非典時期蔓延全國的打狗風波" (*Feidian shiqi manyan quanguo de dagou fengbo*, The crackdown on dogs in China during the SARS epidemic), *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市報), 24 May 2003, <https://news.sohu.com/30/51/news209485130.shtml> (accessed on 3 October 2022).

16. Zhou Zhizhong 周志忠, "銀川: 寵物限養阻斷'非典'傳染源" (*Yinchuan: Chongwu xianyang zuduan "feidian" chuanranryan*, Yinchuan: Restrictions on pet keeping to break the chain of SARS infection), *People.cn* (人民網), 28 April 2003, <https://news.sohu.com/33/39/news208883933.shtml> (accessed on 4 October 2022).

public health hazard; not a single living pet could be found on the streets of Yinchuan at the time.¹⁷

Following the example of Nanjing and Yinchuan, many cities, including Xi'an, Changsha, Chengdu, Kunming, and Shijiazhuang, initiated crackdowns on dogs, and official documents were released to support these crackdowns. In all these official documents, several key words were frequently used, such as "ban the pet/dog trade," "all dogs shall be kept on a leash or in captivity," and "dogs are not allowed in public places."¹⁸

In comparison, in the documents issued during Covid-19, the use of words and linguistic expressions changed from unceremonious to legal and formal. The terms "dog-beating" or "exterminating" were seldom mentioned, particularly in the documents issued by the governments of more developed areas, and more neutral words, such as "dog management/control/restriction," were employed instead.¹⁹ To a certain extent, such changes reflect not only the progressive improvement of pets' social status but also changes in public perceptions of companion animals (Doi and Pettier 2018).

Despite such changes in official documents, many cities in China still reported having killed any pets found in the homes of people who were quarantined during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰ For example, in Shangrao City, Jiangxi Province, in November 2021, a pet dog was killed by Covid-19 health workers while its owner was in quarantine.²¹ The owner was ordered to quarantine in a nearby hotel after a coronavirus case was detected in her apartment complex. Given that pet owners were not allowed to quarantine with their pets, her corgi was left alone in her home. The dog was then beaten to death with a crowbar by the local health workers sent to disinfect the person's apartment, and its carcass was taken away in a yellow biohazard bag.²² This case led to outrage online amid the ongoing debate over whether China's zero-tolerance strategy towards Covid-19 had gone too far.²³ In this case, neither this dog nor its owner had been diagnosed with Covid-19 or developed any symptoms; no tests were conducted to assess the health of the dog before it was killed.

Similar cases occurred in other cities in China. In Shanghai, for example, a pet dog was beaten to death on the street by a health worker after its owners tested positive for Covid-19 and were transferred to a quarantine centre.²⁴ In Xinjiang, three poodles were strangled to death when their owner was quarantined after testing positive for Covid-19. Although an official from the neighbourhood community promised that they would deal with such pet dogs in an appropriate manner, they ultimately broke that promise and killed these dogs without notifying the owner.²⁵ Moreover, a district of Langfang City, in northern China, even ordered the "complete culling of indoor animals" belonging to coronavirus patients.²⁶ The perception and value of dogs is changing in China, as evidenced by the use of words and linguistic expressions in government documents examined in this section. However, although animal welfare and animal rights movements are expanding, they are still in their infancy in China. Much more time and additional effort will be required to substantially improve the legal status and living conditions of companion animals in China.

The involvement of "grassroots" regulators

The Covid-19 epidemic was characterised by changes in the actors involved in dog management. During the SARS outbreak, the regulatory system for pets was incomplete and confusing, with a variety of gaps and overlaps in the coverage of regulation.²⁷ Over the last few decades, dog-related issues have been largely addressed by the police in China. From daily regulation to special crackdowns, the police conventionally serve as the main authorities responsible for dog management. Moreover, urban management officials or "city officers" (chengguan 城管), the "para-police" in charge of maintaining order and enforcing local laws in public spaces, are also involved in dog management. Given a lack of detailed guidance in this area, the division of responsibilities and due process were unclear.

17. Ibid.

18. Zhang Wenling 張文凌, "昆明停止犬類交易" (*Kunming tingzhi quanlei jiaoyi*, Kunming issued an order banning dog trade), *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報), 30 April 2003, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-04-30/08401024445.html> (accessed on 3 October 2022).

19. See, among others: Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Bureau of Lishui Municipality, Qingyuan County 麗水市慶元縣綜合執法局, "關於進一步加強犬類等寵物疫情防控工作的通知" (*Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang quanlei deng chongwu yiqing fangkong gongzuo de tongzhi*, Notice on further strengthening the prevention and control of epidemics in dogs and other pets), 24 August 2021, http://www.zjqy.gov.cn/art/2021/8/24/art_1229428767_2325867.html (accessed on 22 July 2024); Shenzhen, Yantian District Law Enforcement Team 深圳市鹽田區執法隊, "疫情防疫不留死角" (*Yiqing fangkong buliu sijiao*, Eliminating blind spots in pandemic control), 19 March 2020, http://www.yantian.gov.cn/gkmlpt/content/7/7152/post_7152534.html#3898 (accessed on 22 July 2024); Jiaying Municipality Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Bureau 嘉興市綜合執法局, "港區分局全面加强疫情期間犬只管理" (*Gangqu fenju quanmian jiaqiang yiqing qijian quanzhi guanli*, Port area bureau comprehensively strengthens dog management during the epidemic), 3 September 2021, https://zhzfj.jiaxing.gov.cn/art/2021/9/3/art_1601534_58923951.html (accessed on 22 July 2024).

20. Phoebe Zhang, "Coronavirus: China is Killing the Pets of Covid-19 Patients without Their Consent under Draconian New Measures," *South China Morning Post*, 12 November 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/environment/article/3155845/coronavirus-china-killing-pets-covid-19-patients> (accessed on 30 May 2024).

21. "Staffer Who Culled a Pet Dog during Anti-epidemic Mission Removed from Post, Apologizes to Pet Owner," *Global Times*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238885.shtml> (accessed on 27 May 2024).

22. Amy Cheng, "Chinese Health Workers Killed a Corgi While its Owner was in Covid Quarantine, Sparking Widespread Anger," *The Washington Post*, 16 November 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/16/china-corgi-killing-chaofen-covid/> (accessed on 27 May 2024).

23. Helen Davidson, "Outcry in China after Covid Health Workers Kill Dog While Owner was in Quarantine," *The Guardian*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/15/outcry-in-china-after-covid-health-workers-kill-dog-while-owner-was-in-quarantine> (accessed on 30 May 2024).

24. Jessie Yeung, "A Covid Worker Beat a Dog to Death in Shanghai after Its Owner Tested Positive," *CNN*, 8 April 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/08/china/shanghai-corgi-death-china-covid-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed on 27 May 2024).

25. "因為我陽了，我養的三條狗被他們活活勒死" (*Yinwei wo yangle, wo yangde santiao gou bei tamen huohuo leisi*, Because I was tested positive for Covid, my three dogs were strangled by them), 23 August 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/zp4BJcX4ii2ji7SOEtWuMg> (accessed on 26 November 2022).

26. Sinéad Baker, "Chinese City Orders All Indoor Pets Belonging to Covid-19 Patients in One Neighbourhood to be Killed," *Business Insider*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-langfang-district-says-kill-covid-patients-pets-2022-3> (accessed on 26 November 2022).

27. Author's interview with police officers and urban management officers, April 2023.

As the officers mentioned during the interviews, there was a lack of clear and consistent guidelines for dog management during SARS. In most cities, the relevant duties were carried out jointly by the police and urban management officials, which frequently created gaps and overlaps.²⁸ None of them were willing to take the responsibility for dog management. The police were insufficiently incentivised to regulate dogs. According to a police officer, the police were too busy to handle issues related to dog management, which in addition was perceived to be the least important aspect of policing. It was even considered degrading for a police officer to be responsible for dog management. Police officers were largely unwilling to keep an eye on dog-related issues because wearing a police uniform while catching dogs on the street was considered improper, shameful, and a discredit to the reputation of the police.²⁹ Urban management officials were powerless to fulfil the regulatory responsibilities of dog management. For example, only the police had the power to enter private premises for the sake of investigation, while urban management officials were not given this power. "At the end of the day, we would still require police assistance; as such, why not just let them be solely responsible for this regulatory sphere, fulfilling the relevant functions from A to Z?"³⁰, explained an urban management official. In this context, while there were laws and regulations on dog management, no enforcement body or institution was incentivised to enforce these laws. As a result of insufficient guidelines, most complaints from citizens regarding dog-related issues were ignored or went unresolved.

From the 1990s to the 2000s, the responsibility for dog management was repeatedly switched between the police and the urban management bureau. Both parties would pass the buck to one another.³¹ The regulations regarding dog management were lax during this period. At that time, the enforcement of the dog ban was absolutely dependent on the ruling leader.³² During the outbreak of SARS, special organisations named dog-beating squads (*dagou dui* 打狗隊), which were mainly comprised of members of the police force and urban management officials, were widely set up in various regions of China to deal with dog-related issues.³³ They were ad hoc organisations set up to tackle issues that regular enforcement strategies failed to adequately address. To effectively accomplish their mission within a short period of time, dog-killing campaigns were operated in a centralised and vertically managed manner. The members of the dog-beating squads were under an administrative command to round up and kill the dogs of SARS patients, regardless of whether the dogs showed SARS symptoms.³⁴ Hundreds of dogs were killed by them in the most gruesome manner as fears grew that the pets could be spreading the SARS virus.³⁵ As such, the dog control policies and enforcement activities during the SARS outbreak were severe, harsh, and punitive in nature.³⁶

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the dog control campaigns staged a comeback. However, instead of setting up special dog-beating teams, a community-based control mode emerged for the practice of dog management. In addition to conventional regulators (i.e., police officers and urban management officers), new regulators were also involved. Grassroots officials at the township, village, and neighbourhood levels began playing an increasingly important role in daily dog regulation. As witnessed during the outbreak of Covid-19, many orders related to dog control were issued by such grassroots

regulators at villagers' committees and residents' committees (RCs) levels.³⁷ Municipal institutions in urban China begin at the level of the street office, the "basic" administrative level, which is equivalent to the township (*xiang* 鄉) in rural China. Residents' committees are "a mass organisation for self-government at the grassroots level" (*jiceng qunzhong zizhi zuzhi* 基層群眾自治組織),³⁸ which do not officially belong to the administrative hierarchy but provide dynamic administrative support for maintaining "moral and political order in the neighbourhood" (Audin 2015).

Generally, RCs are responsible for managing street-level governance across three or four apartment or residential complexes (*xiaoqu* 小區) (ibid.). As a bridge between residents and the administration, members of RCs are responsible for using their own expertise and discretion to implement public policy in a smooth manner. In other words, their core function is to eliminate the tension between central policy and local actions. To effectively fulfil their function, RCs must make their own interpretations and deploy flexible coping strategies in the implementation process. In urban areas, WeChat groups were established among police, urban management officials, community officers, and grid attendants (*wangge yuan* 網格員) (Mittelstaedt 2022)³⁹ in an attempt to improve cross-department partnerships and problem-solving techniques and thus proactively address the immediate conditions.⁴⁰ "Grid management" (*wanggehua guanli* 網格化管理) is an important tool of social control, which was largely deployed in China's war on Covid-19 due to its enormous potential to strengthen the state's

28. Ibid.

29. Author's interview with policeman Sun, a sergeant of Public Order Department of City Q, April 2023.

30. Author's interview with urban management officials, May 2023.

31. Oliver August, "Fearful Chinese Slaughter Pets in SARS Hysteria," *The Times*, 10 May 2003, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fearful-chinese-slaughter-pets-in-sars-hysteria-0k58j3z36lz> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

32. Author's interview with a frontline police officer, April 2023.

33. Author's interview with police officers and urban management officials, April 2023.

34. "中國雲南的'打狗風暴'" (*Zhongguo Yunnan de "dagou fengbao"*, "Dog killing storm" in Yunnan, China), *Radio Free Asia*, 3 August 2006, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/gou-20060803.html> (accessed on 26 November 2022).

35. Li Yuan 李媛 and Li Xiaobo 李曉波, "一槍沒打死磚棒再夾擊" (*Yiqiang mei dasi zhuanbang zai jiaji*, Beating dogs with guns, bricks, and sticks), *Tianfu Morning Post* (天府早報), 10 May 2003, <http://news.sohu.com/80/14/news209171480.shtml> (accessed on 26 November 2022).

36. Author's interview with police officers and urban management officials, April 2023.

37. "全村的狗被活活打死" (*Quancun de gou bei huohuo dasi*, All dogs in the village were beaten to death), *Netease* (網易), 15 February 2020, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/F5EPGFRN054028TW.html> (accessed on 27 July 2024).

38. Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 全國人民代表大會常務委員會, "中華人民共和國城市居民委員會組織法" (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chengshi jumin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa*, Organic law of the urban residents committees of the People's Republic of China), 26 December 1989, Article 2, <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=1207&EncodingName=big5> (accessed on 22 July 2024).

39. Under China's administrative management system, the district government divides its jurisdiction into three levels of grids. Traditional neighbourhoods are considered large grids, smaller communities within each neighbourhood are designated as medium grids, and residential areas in each community are further divided into small or basic grids. The people who manage the small or basic grids are called grid attendants.

40. During the interview, the police officer presented the said WeChat groups to the author. As he explained, any member of the chat group can communicate with one another directly. As compared to making phone calls, the advantage of using the WeChat group is that the members can access the responsible officers directly and conveniently. Through tagging the relevant officer in the WeChat group, they can convey important messages effectively and update all the group members, without unnecessary delays.

capacity for surveillance and the delivery of public services; it is also widely applied in dealing with dog-related disputes and dog control issues.⁴¹ Simultaneously, similar communication groups were established in rural areas, with the police, village officials, members of the village committee, and voluntary representatives working jointly on the issue of dog control.

The involvement of such grassroots regulators contributed to expanding regulation coverage and making the regulations more penetrating. Delegating some policing obligations and powers to officers at the village or community level helps such regulatory power penetrate deeply into many aspects of citizens' lives. The officers working at the grassroots level are obliged to conduct everyday forms of management to accurately identify early signs of disharmony and conflict in the areas they are responsible for. They are also obliged to efficiently convey such information to responsible departments. In this context, the role of the police shifted from providing first aid to being the last resort for dog-related issues.⁴² This coincided with the developing trends identified in policing practice found by other scholars. As mentioned by Wu et al. (2016: 271), "the mini-station system and its intense interaction with neighbourhood committees and local residents, to a certain extent, demonstrate active partnership between the police and the community."

In the past decade, particularly during the Covid-19 outbreak, the use of police patrols to regularly check for unregistered dogs and forbidden dog-related behaviours has gradually decreased. Instead, grid attendants have come to play an increasingly vigorous and proactive role in dealing with dog-related incidents and conflicts on a daily basis. On the one hand, because of the strict quarantine and lockdowns enforced in most cities, only a controlled number of citizens appeared on the streets and other public areas. On the other hand, the deep involvement of Chinese police in enforcing Covid-19 emergency measures created additional tasks for those engaged in police work. Accordingly, the Chinese police, apart from their ordinary duties, assumed additional responsibilities during the peak periods of the pandemic, which significantly increased their workload and stress levels (Jiang and Xie 2021). Thus, the police force had insufficient personnel to arrange for regular patrols to ensure dog control.⁴³ Particularly during viral epidemics, with massive containment measures, such as citywide lockdowns and large-scale quarantines, online and remote regulatory methods⁴⁴ were considered to be more penetrating, practical, and efficient than purely offline enforcement.

This new regulatory mode brought with it numerous improvements to the relevant sphere, as well as a few loopholes. Within such a top-down approach, grassroot regulators' discretionary decisions may, in fact, sidetrack or sabotage the original state policies and regulatory intentions (Zhou 2010). For example, a community officer clubbed dogs to death in front of horrified residents in the name of curbing the coronavirus. During this process, he continued to emphasise that he was acting in keeping with "national policy" and said that "We have no choice!"⁴⁵ In essence, the crackdown order issued by the villagers' committee and the enforcement behaviour of this community officer could be justified by neither legal statutes nor administrative policies at higher levels. This case appears to be an example of a failed decision made by the village committee at its own discretion to cope with the administrative goal of zero infections.

Moreover, the regulatory decisions made at the grassroots level were often inconsistent and overzealous. For example, the management office of a residential complex in Shijiazhuang announced the dog ban by posting an "emergency notice" indicating that residents were banned from dog walking and told they could do so only at their own risk.⁴⁶ A residential complex in Wuhan announced a similar dog ban by broadcasting "Stay home! No dog walking! Any dog will be exterminated immediately if found walking outdoors!"⁴⁷ Similar announcements were made by the management offices in Qingdao and Zhengzhou.⁴⁸ Many pet crackdowns were caused by failed discretionary decisions made at the grassroots level of governance. The underlying reason for such decisions is blame avoidance. Under the existing top-down performance evaluation and responsibility attribution pressures, local officials have a strong motivation to avoid blame in the face of crises such as policy failures, mass incidents, or natural disasters (Ran and Jian 2021). The danger lies in the way in which a fear-driven overreaction can result in a brutal and disastrous method of "animal management" during pandemics. Facing the challenges that arose from the Covid-19 pandemic, the community-level officials therefore believed that it was better to kill a dog than to spare an infected one by mistake, regardless of the fact that there was no risk that the pet dogs could cause the virus to spread.

The participation of nongovernmental institutions

The governance pattern during the Covid-19 pandemic was not as harsh and severe in comparison with the previous one. Although coercive elements remained the main theme of governance, an increasing number of "soft" elements were added to regulatory practice. Notably, nonadministrative organisations, such as pet clinics and pet shops, began to become involved in the chain of regulation. For example, some pet clinics served as the hub of information and

41. Author's interview with police officers and urban management officers, May 2023.

42. Ibid.

43. Author's interview with police officers, April 2023.

44. For example, contact-tracing applications such as 健康码 (Jiankang ma, Health code) and 行程碼 (Xingcheng ma, Itinerary code) were deployed by the authorities to identify Chinese citizens who were potentially exposed to Covid-19. Through mobile phone connections to the local base stations of China's big three telecom companies, the itinerary code allowed the authorities to accurately track citizens' travel history. Moreover, the health code was used as an e-passport that flagged users who had been in an area with potentially exposed or diagnosed patients. These contact-tracing applications allowed the authorities to freely and accurately access every citizen's personal information, including travel history, residence, medical records, the duration of time spent in high-risk areas, and relationships with potential carriers.

45. "全村的狗(...)" (Quancun de gou (...)), All dogs in the village (...), op. cit.

46. "石家莊兩隻泰迪犬被打死" (Shijiazhuang liangzhi taidiquan bei dasi, Two toy poodles were beaten to death in Shijiazhuang), *The Paper* (澎湃), 28 February 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6207613 (accessed on 12 July 2024).

47. "疫情期間禁止遛狗" (Yiqing qijian jinzhi liugou, Dog walking banned during the coronavirus outbreak), *Sina.com* (新網), 21 February 2020, https://k.sina.cn/article_6435176995_17f910223001004n3.html (accessed on 7 October 2022).

48. "Ban on Pets in Qingdao Community Criticized by Netizens," *Global Times*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202012/1208685.shtml?id=11> (accessed on 22 November 2022); "鄭州一社區出'禁犬令'" (Zhengzhou yi shequ chu "jinquan ling," A Zhengzhou community issues a "ban on dogs"), *Qianjiang Evening News* (錢江晚報), 29 November 2021, <https://www.thehour.cn/news/483810.html> (accessed on 30 November 2022).

regulatory propaganda during the outbreak of Covid-19.⁴⁹ Compared to the previous practice of sole management by law enforcement authorities, the regulators began to leverage the strengths of non-authority and nongovernment bodies to achieve their governance goal. Many pet clinics and shops have been employed to help the authorities fulfil regulatory obligations because they have advantages in terms of information collection and communication. They are required to collect and keep basic information about dogs and their owners. In comparison with the authorities, it is easier for them to establish close, positive relationships with pet owners. Moreover, they are more familiar with the actual and dynamic pet ownership statistics and possess detailed information regarding the households that own dogs in nearby communities. Indeed, as pet ownership is often restricted to “one dog per household” (*yi quan yi hu* 一犬一戶),⁵⁰ people wishing to have a second dog tend to register it in a different locality than the actual one, bringing discrepancies between official records and actual situations. Private actors such as pet clinics and shops may therefore have a better knowledge of the actual number of pet dogs in their neighbourhood.

Particularly during the pandemic, massive lockdowns and quarantines led to an unavoidable increase in the workload of and challenges faced by the authorities. It was not easy for them to complete even basic work. Both the police and law enforcement bodies were understaffed to deal with the trivial issues of pet dogs, such as encouraging owners to register their dogs, vaccinating them in a timely manner, and promoting “civilised” dog-walking. Moreover, it was not easy to monitor the dynamic health condition of pets within a regulatory area, for example, if there is a pet infected with a virus or displaying symptoms of Covid-19. With the involvement of pet clinics and shops, such functions can be easily and effectively completed in their daily communications with their clients, which can be face-to-face interactions, online conversations, or interactions via social media (e.g., WeChat Moments). As a police officer pointed out:

Keeping pets in an urban area is an emerging issue that has an influence on everyone in society. Such initiative measurements helped our regulators to enforce the intended policies and guide public opinion effectively. (Interview, May 2023)

Instead of purely coercive and top-to-down governance, this new approach played a significant role in information collection, problem identification, regulatory propaganda, and policy implementation.

In addition, to facilitate the work of dog management during the pandemic, the authorities creatively included sanitation workers in the regulatory chain. As a police constable stated during the interview, sanitation workers functioned as the “eyes” of the police:

Given the nature of their job, sanitation workers can be found all over the city. In this regard, they can help us to locate stray dogs and other unlicensed dogs wandering the streets. Once such dogs come within their sight, the sanitation workers will take photos and report them to their management team. Based on the information provided by their management team, we can accurately target specific dogs and catch them quickly and effectively... In accordance with the behaviour patterns of dogs, a one-kilometre radius would be the ordinary activity

area for a dog. With their assistance, it is not difficult for us to find the targeted dogs. Generally, we just need to walk around and wait for a while (Interview, April 2023).⁵¹

Compared to previous practices, the new regulatory style appears to be more pervasive, penetrating, and powerful. It is soft and gentle in appearance but harsh at its core. Under the new regulatory mode, the privacy of pet owners has been exposed to threats. Moreover, with eyes all over the city, the dogs have nowhere to hide.

Increasingly responsive authorities

Conventionally, as revealed by the practice of pet management in China, the authorities in the country have paid little attention to the welfare of animals, as it has never been considered a priority concern of governance (Cao 2015: 164; Sima and O’Sullivan 2016).⁵² Animal ethics became extremely vulnerable at certain specific historical moments, such as during the SARS and Covid-19 pandemic. According to an officer at the Chinese capital’s police headquarters, pets were considered potential virus carriers, and they had to “cut off any possible sources of infection to fight against SARS”.⁵³ Another police officer, from Nanjing, mentioned that “Stricter precaution measures were necessary, especially during the crucial period for SARS prevention.”⁵⁴ However, although animal ethics remained a social problem during the Covid-19 pandemic, there were a few changes in the government’s attitude towards and public perception of family pets.

Today, the authorities are far more responsive to public opinion regarding animal care than they were before. As observed during the Covid-19 epidemic, divergent public opinion can affect law enforcement, even in cases when the relevant policy has been enforced (Li 2023). For example, after cat and dog bans were

49. Author’s interview with police officers, April 2023.

50. “One dog per household” is a policy adopted in many cities of China, restricting each household to one dog. See, for example: Standing Committee of Beijing Municipal People’s Congress 北京市人民代表大會常務委員會, “北京市養犬管理條例” (*Beijingshi yangquan guanli tiaoli*, Regulations of Beijing municipality on dog management), Article 10, 15 October 2003, https://gaj.beijing.gov.cn/zhengce/zc/g/202204/t20220402_2652952.html (accessed on 1 August 2024); Standing Committee of Shanghai municipal People’s Congress 上海市人民代表大會常務委員會, “上海市養犬管理條例” (*Shanghaishi yangquan guanli tiaoli*, Regulations of Shanghai municipality on dog management), Article 12, 23 February 2011, <https://gaj.sh.gov.cn/shga/wzXxfGj/detail?pa=eabce2b5dd4411bf89cd8d0bb43e938> (accessed on 1 August 2024).

51. As police officers and urban management officials explained during interviews conducted in April 2023, this practice has been implemented in many cities of China. Under China’s grid management system, sanitation workers frequently assisted the work of grid attendants, helping to ferret out issues including littering, stray dogs, uncivilised dog walking, and smoking in public areas. Bi Zhongwei 畢重偉, “環衛變身網格員” (*Huanwei bianshen wanggeyuan*, Sanitation worker turned to be the grid attendant), *Dalian tianjian wang* (大連天健網), 18 November 2022, https://dalian.runsky.com/2022-11/18/content_6214903.html (accessed on 27 May 2024); “盤錦環衛工人成為兼職網格員” (*Panjin huanwei gongren chengwei jianzhi wanggeyuan*, The sanitation workers in Panjin become part-time grid attendants), *Liaoning Daily* (遼寧日報), 11 December 2019, <https://n.cri.cn/20191211/fd4fea2c-704a-5877-5153-c048755216af.html> (accessed on 27 May 2024).

52. As a police officer mentioned during an interview, “How would we be able to pay attention to dogs when we have no time to regulate the human beings?”

53. “Beijing Pets to be Slaughtered in SARS Fight,” *Irish Examiner*, 7 March 2003, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/asia/30098027.html> (accessed on 27 November 2022).

54. Audra Ang, “China to Euthanize Pets of SARS Victims,” *The Intelligencer*, 6 May 2003, <https://www.theintelligencer.com/news/article/China-to-Euthanize-Pets-of-SARS-Victims-10478736.php> (accessed on 30 November 2022).

officially announced in Weiyang (a district of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province) and Nehe (a county-level city in western Heilongjiang Province), such bans were recalled after a short period of time. On 26 January 2020, Nehe announced a Notice on Killing Stray Cats and Dogs in the City (*Guanyu busha quanshi liulang mao he liulang gouquan de tongzhi* 關於捕殺全市流浪貓和流浪狗犬的通知) at the municipal level to exterminate all stray cats and dogs and burn their carcasses at a livestock burning site.⁵⁵ The notice also required family pets to be kept strictly indoors. However, it was revoked only two days after its sudden announcement. Intense public opposition to it had forced the officials to backtrack, making this pet ban movement one of the most ephemeral campaign ever. Moreover, the authorities officially stated on their social media account that they had not taken any action against stray cats and dogs. The government expressed its appreciation for the citizens' love and care for stray animals and promised to place such unowned cats and dogs in quarantine safely.⁵⁶ Similar circumstances appeared in Weiyang, Xi'an, where a street office apologised for the improper governance decision made by the RC and management office in its area.⁵⁷ In Zhejiang, approximately 13 days after dog-killing incidents happened in the village, the responsible villagers' committee publicly apologised for the improper arrangements and said it would stop the crackdown immediately.⁵⁸ In comparison, the authorities took a more apathetic and passive approach to public complaints during the SARS outbreak.

As Benjamin Liebman, a preeminent scholar of contemporary Chinese law, suggests, China has witnessed a populist return and overreaction to the need for social stability (2013). Social stability is now defined as a top national concern for the Chinese authorities. Instead of being ignorant of it, the authorities in China have become increasingly sensitive and responsive to "instability" in the field of animal protection and pet regulation because government officials in China have placed tremendous emphasis on avoiding any potential unrest (Edin 2003). In this context, instability is manifest in what the authorities regard as inharmonious relations within communities and between individuals and the state caused by dog-related disputes, dog bite incidents, and animal protection protests (Trevaskes et al. 2014). In addition to accomplishing the fixed annual quota,⁵⁹ the authorities must be responsive to public opinion and seek to pacify any criticism or grievances before an impasse becomes inevitable.

However, instead of substantively responding to the problems rooted in urban animal companion regulation, the authorities often simply revoked the controversial decisions.⁶⁰ More often than not, they offered an explanation or apology to calm down angry pet owners and animal activists, without seriously addressing the loopholes in the system (Wang 2021).⁶¹ Despite the limitations mentioned above, there were a few positive elements of regulatory practice. For example, it emphasised the importance of procedural justice, thereby making the authorities appear to be more careful and cautious in handling dogs in their regular work. As mentioned by the urban management officers:

In response to the dog-killing incidents that occurred during Covid-19, the animal rights activists visited our office almost every day (...). They kept asking us about the conditions of the dogs we caught on the street. Such activists, who paid

tremendous attention to issues related to dog management, are quite annoying. They strive to know how we would deal with the dogs caught and whether we will secretly sell such dogs for profit. They were afraid we would barbarically eat such dogs or sell them to dog meat restaurants. They are extremely persistent and, therefore, we must act well in the relevant area. (Interview with urban management officials, April 2023)

Another urban management official added: "Sometimes, they even undertake unannounced visits, trying to 'investigate' our working environment and the living conditions of the dogs inside."

When activists questioned the law in conversations with powerholders, the regulators were compelled to change their working attitude and pay attention to procedural justice. In response to activists' challenges, the authorities became responsive, patiently explaining their working procedures and providing supporting evidence.

Before we took the dogs back to shelter, we would take three photos from different angles for each dog and record one GPS coordinate for the place where we caught it. No matter what happened to the dog inside the shelter, either natural death or euthanasia, we would take photos as evidence and keep records of the photos. (Interview with urban management officials, April 2023)

From their viewpoint, such pressure encouraged the authorities to behave strictly in accordance with the acts and regulations within their power:

To be honest, it is not easy for us to explain and prove our innocence when they post videos online. We must behave carefully and prudentially, and back up our decisions and regulatory actions with evidence and supporting documents. Dog regulation is completely different from what it was ten years ago. Previously, citizens were afraid of the government,

55. "黑龍江訥河市通告捕殺流浪貓狗防疫" (*Heilongjiang Neheshi tonggao busha liulang maogou fangyi*, Nehe in Heilongjiang Province has issued a notice to kill all stray cats and dogs to prevent the epidemic), *Shangyou News* (上游新聞), 28 January 2020, https://page.om.qq.com/page/OdsNqz9htsU3BuuA1ug0fd_Q0 (accessed on 9 October 2022).
56. "訥河宣傳" (*Nehe xuanchuan*, Nehe publicity), Weibo account, 28 January 2020, <https://weibo.com/5827586026/rxDbAtr> (accessed on 6 October 2020).
57. "西安一物業禁止居民養寵物" (*Xian yi wuye jinzhi jumin yang chongwu*, A property management in Xi'an bans residents from keeping pets), *Sohu.com* (搜狐), 31 January 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/369825095_100023190 (accessed on 30 November 2022).
58. "溫州永嘉小姐姐理性投訴, 當地不再打狗" (*Wenzhou Yongjia xiaojiejie lixing tousu, dangdi buzai dagou*, In response to a young girl's rational complaint, Yongjia revoked the order of dog beating), *Weibo* (微博), 15 February 2020, <https://weibo.com/tarticle/p/show?id=2309634472346520977615> (accessed on 9 October 2022).
59. As a police constable mentioned during an interview, there is a quota of 30 cases assigned for this year. They are required to resolve dog-related cases to complete their quota, which includes cases like uncivilised dog walking, dog attacks, and unregistered dog keeping.
60. See "黑龍江訥河市(...)" (*Heilongjiang Neheshi (...)*, Nehe in Heilongjiang Province (...)), op. cit.
61. "各地'限狗令'頻遭夭折" (*Gedi "xiangou ling" pinzao yaozhe*, Many cities in China revoked the "dog bans"), *Legal Daily* (法制日報), 23 June 2017, <https://news.cctv.com/2017/07/23/ARTIXtjwUK665QPrxnQn9170723.shtml> (accessed on 26 May 2024).

and they dared not to voice their opinions and make criticisms, while citizens in the new era have no fear of questioning the government and speaking out. (Interview with police officers, April 2023)

Conclusion

Pet-culling incidents have not only occurred during the SARS and Covid-19 pandemics. They have a long history in China related to disease control, rabies eradication and public health governance (Jeffreys 2020). In essence, such incidents are indicative of the impact that China's historical biopolitical approach to life has had on the treatment of pets. In this regard, the changes observed between the SARS and Covid-19 outbreaks reflect the changes that have taken place in the perceptions of the public and authorities regarding companion pets. Along with changing social values related to human-animal relationships and growing public consciousness of animal welfare, pet animals, particularly dogs, have come to be considered family members, rather than merely property, in China. In the same vein, fewer and fewer cities in China officially endorse the consumption of cats and dogs. Since 2014, due to backlash, the Yulin government no longer officially endorses its dog meat festival, while such events are still held unofficially on a smaller scale.⁶² In 2020, Shenzhen and Zhuhai collectively banned the consumption of cats and dogs,⁶³ and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs removed dogs from the national catalogue of livestock.⁶⁴ These initiatives are an affirmation of changing Chinese attitudes towards companion animals. Such changes are closely connected with the long-term efforts of the animal protection movement in China (Cao 2015: 164-69).⁶⁵

Although some people still believe there is a risk that companion animals in China will transmit infectious diseases to humans, an increasing number of people have begun to protest against animal cruelty, reflecting significant changes in the public perception of companion animals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many pet shop owners and citizens voluntarily provided temporary shelter for pets and abandoned animals when their owners were in quarantine. In addition, many animal welfare organisations actively called public attention to the need to avoid pet abandonment and clarified that cats and dogs were not likely to spread the virus to humans. With support from local governments, mobile pet hospitals and pet quarantine centres were successfully established in cities across China, including Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Changsha, Chengdu, Ningbo, Shanghai, and Chongqing. In contrast, such phenomena were less common during the SARS outbreak, when countless dogs were reported to have been abandoned and culled. Although animal welfare organisations received hundreds of complaints per day in a single city, effective actions were rarely taken.⁶⁶

Such developments are entangled with changes in the overall perception of the place of companion animals in Chinese society. In urban China, human relationships with companion animals involve a new kind of sociality, intimacy, and love. Companion animals, especially cats and dogs, constitute one of the closest forms of human-animal interaction in modern Chinese societies. Many people share their lives, homes, and lifestyles with pets. According

to a survey data, the cat and dog population in urban China exceeded 116 million in 2022, compared with around 87.5 million in 2017.⁶⁷ An increasing number of people in China tend to treat their companion animals like family members because such animals can satisfy human beings' psychological needs for companionship, friendship, and unconditional love. For example, some childfree families tend to consider their dogs or cats as their children. From their point of view, companion animals are better suited to busy and highly unstable family life in the context of modernity and mobility (Xu and Xia 2014). Many people, especially young people, opt to have pets instead of children because the prospect of raising a child, with all the attendant responsibilities and expectations, is too daunting.⁶⁸ Companion animals also become both a class symbol and a safe refuge from the stressful demands of working life for their urban middle-class owners. Furthermore, some unmarried women treat their pets as children, partners, or kin (Yang and Li 2022). Such Chinese professional women choose to seek affection from their companion animals rather than male human partners. From their perspective, having a pet is a way for them to enjoy companionship without compromising their career plans and life aspirations (Tan, Liu, and Gao 2021).

Despite the changing role of pets in modern society (Xu et al. 2023), the living conditions and treatment of pets in China are inconsistent with such changes. China has long been criticised for its outdated regulation and weak enforcement in the realm of animal protection (Qi 2024). The country was even given a grade of G, the lowest possible rating, in an assessment of "laws against causing animal suffering" conducted by World Animal Protection.⁶⁹ The existing legislation offers only limited protection to a tiny group

62. Amy Qin, "In Fight to Ban Dog Meat, China's Activists Find an Ally: The Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, 23 June 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/world/asia/china-dog-meat.html?_ga=2.215774615.1614395977.1669468032-1287650099.1669468032 (accessed on 26 November 2022).

63. Lok Yi Siu, "Animal Rights in China: The Lowdown on Legislation, Markets, and Consumption," *The Vegan Review*, 1 September 2020, <https://theveganreview.com/animal-rights-in-china-the-lowdown-on-legislation-markets-and-consumption/> (accessed on 30 November 2022).

64. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China 中華人民共和國農業農村部, "國家畜禽遺傳資源目錄" (*Guojia chuqin yichuan ziyuan mulu*, National catalogue of livestock and poultry genetic resources), 27 May 2020, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2020/content_5530371.htm (accessed on 22 July 2024). Only two sub-species of dogs (the Tibetan mastiff and Shandong slender dog) were previously included in the catalogue for 14 years.

65. Kitty Block, "Shenzhen Bans Dog and Cat Meat Trade; First City in Mainland China to Do So," *The Humane Society of the United States*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.humanesociety.org/blog/shenzhen-bans-dog-and-cat-meat-trade-first-city-mainland-china-do-so> (accessed on 29 May 2024).

66. "寵物失寵的日子" (*Chongwu shichong de rizi*, Pets falling out of favour), *Sohu.com* (搜狐), 17 June 2003, <https://news.sohu.com/25/15/news210191525.shtml> (accessed on 3 October 2022).

67. PetHadoop, 2023, "中國寵物行業白皮書: 2022年中國寵物消費報告" (*Zhongguo chongwu hangye baipishu: 2022 nian Zhongguo chongwu xiaofei baogao*, Pet industry white paper: 2022 China pet industry development report), Beijing: China Agriculture Press.

68. Justin Jin, "Children? No Thanks – It's Too Expensive in China. Pets and Partying are the Future, Say Millennials and Beyond," *South China Morning Post*, 8 October 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/3237044/children-no-thanks-its-too-expensive-china-pets-and-partying-are-future-say-millennials-and-beyond> (accessed on 28 May 2024).

69. "China," *Animal Protection Index*, <https://api.worldanimalprotection.org/country/china> (accessed on 24 November 2022).

of animals, while the area of pet protection is ignored.⁷⁰ From the enforcement perspective, the welfare of pets remains vulnerable, particularly during public health crises, and has not been considered a pressing concern in China. In response, there is a need for policy elites to consider the drafting and adoption of an emergency response plan that can provide rescue services, care, shelter, and meet the essential needs of individuals with companion pets and companion pets themselves following a major disaster or emergency. On the one hand, this plan should include humane animal rescue and evacuation measures to standardise the care and rescue of animals in households when members are evacuated for medical or other purposes. On the other hand, pet-friendly shelters should be established to ensure that companion animals are taken care of when they cannot stay with their owners. Therefore, it is important to take the significance of the human-animal bond into account during emergency response planning. This may be especially true when owners are forced to abandon their pets in a major disaster or emergency.

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70. For example, the existing legislation largely focuses on regulating vets and the treatment of laboratory animals. See the Animal Husbandry Law of the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國畜牧法, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xumu fa*), amended in 2015, https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/fzgz/fzgzxzl/fzgzlfgz/202211/t20221103_466621.html (accessed on 24 July 2024).

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