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Second part of your book is dedicated to animals as food. How do you see the “animals as not food” movement, aka veganism? Is it pointing to the prevailing future we are going to have?

This question is relevant to my own research. Being a historian of modern Japan interested mainly in questions of ethnicity and wartime behavior, my initial concern with animals was purely serendipitous. When researching the Japanese encounter with the West, I found that during the late nineteenth century, the Japanese began to consume meat after more than a millennium of virtual taboo. The origin of this taboo is found in the seventh century, shortly after the introduction of Buddhism, and was associated with the slaughtering of draft animals. Scholars tend to explain the initial taboo as motivated by religion, but, in my view, it was mainly ecological. In the intensive agricultural society that developed in Japan by then, there was simply not enough food to maintain both humans and animals.

As a result, domestic animals began to disappear and gradually the local diet became completely vegetarian. The return to meat consumption in the late nineteenth century was motivated initially by the desire to imitate the West, associating meat consumption with large bodies, greater energy, and by extension also with power and empire. Still, the ecological constraints were not over and there were no animals to fulfill this carnivore aspiration. Thus, as late as 1940, the Japanese consume on average about two kilograms of meat annually. It was only the affluence and high export in the 1960s that facilitated the consumption of a considerable amount of meat in Japan, part of it imported, although always in smaller quantities than in the West. In the past, many agricultural societies were not much different from premodern Japanese society. They were almost completely vegetarian and tended to consume meat only in small quantities and on rare occasions, such

as holidays. The Japanese case suggests that vegetarianism poses neither cultural nor health problems. In the long run, society got used to this form of diet inasmuch killing animals and consuming their meat seemed abnormal and shocking. More importantly, this long period of vegetarianism did not prevent the Japanese from developing a sophisticated society and elaborate culture. The only physical “side effect” was a certain impact on their body size: They turned smaller and by 1900 the average height of men was about 158 centimeters. This case offers us some insights into a possible future. Apparently, the breeding of domestic animals (including fish) causes larger and larger damage to the environment and may force us to drastically limit our consumption in the future. This does not mean that we are going to turn into complete vegetarians like the Japanese, especially since there are already certain substitutes for animal meat. But, it is evident that life without meat, or much less meat, is possible and may have also some health, let alone moral, benefits.

Finally, in the whole 143,484 words of your reference book on animals in Asia, I failed to find one single mention of the cutest bestial symbol anyone ever had: Pandas – I’m a huge fan, but China’s rediscovery of pandas and using them as a potent tool of diplomacy is something of significance, I think. Some other countries tried to do the same – Australia and its koalas come to my mind – but none came close to China in this regard – again, admittedly, I’m biased, but I think my overall estimation is not far off the point. Would you agree with my assumptions? And if so, why do you think China succeeded where others failed? The panda is certainly one of the “cutest” animals, at least from a human viewpoint, but there is to me more than meets the eye. In fact, the story of the giant panda and its conservation in China offers several perspectives on the way cer-

tain animals are preserved and others are not and how this treatment could be extended. Four aspects have made this animal so coveted, perhaps the most sought-after wild animal on the planet today. First, it has black patches on its eyes and ears that make it doll-like and particularly cute. Second, it is considered peaceful, quiet, and friendly. Adding to this image is the fact that despite its carnivorous origin it is fed on plants: bamboo shoots and leaves making up more than 99 percent of its diet. Third, the panda is very rare, as there are less than 3,000 individuals in the wild and all of them live in a limited and hardly accessible habitat. Finally, the Chinese government was wise enough to control the spread of pandas. Treating it as China’s national symbol, the government began in the 1970s what was known as “panda diplomacy,” and gave pandas as gifts to American and Japanese zoos. Since 1984, however, China has ventured on 10-year loans of pandas, with very strict terms. Among other things, the receiving zoos are required to pay up to US\$1 million per year and under the provision that any cubs born during the lease remain the property of China. For all these reasons, no more than 50-60 pandas are living today in zoos outside China and this makes this animal even more attractive. No other animal is enjoying today such a combination of characteristics that help conservation. Despite the Chinese poor record in protecting certain animals, the giant panda will survive. Indeed, in 2016, this species was reclassified from “endangered” to “vulnerable.” Other animals are not as fortunate. The koala, for instance, is also cute and seemingly passive but, unlike the panda, its habitat is far more accessible and the Australian government does not control its export correctly. For these reasons, its number has declined from as many as 10 million in the early 20th century to around 43,000 this year. In other words, being “cute” is important but not enough for the survival of a species today.

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About the book:

Animals and Human Society in Asia

This edited collection offers a comprehensive overview of the different aspects of human-animal interactions in Asia throughout history. With 12 thematically-arranged chapters, this book examines the diverse roles that beasts, livestock, and fish – real and metaphorical – have played in Asian history, society, and culture. Ranging from prehistory to the present day, the authors address

a wealth of topics including the domestication of animals, dietary practices and sacrifice, hunting, the use of animals in war, and the representation of animals in literature and art. Providing a unique perspective on human interaction with the environment, the volume is cross-disciplinary in its reach, offering enriching insights to the fields of animal ethics, Asian studies, world history and more.

