

*In this open letter, Ju seeks both to persuade Moon Jae-in, then candidate for the presidency of South Korea, to take a stand against the dog meat industry, and to convince other readers to reconsider their own positions on the topic. The piece balances respect for others' opinions with logical, focused, research-based argumentation. (Instructor: Jenny Xie)*

## ON DOG MEAT CONSUMPTION AND REGULATION

Jaehyoung Ju

Dear President Moon Jae-in:

Congratulations on your nomination. With recent years characterized by turmoil and instability within the Republic, I genuinely hope you can win over the people and lead us to a brighter future. You made headlines when you announced that the “First Dog” of Korea may possibly have been an abandoned stray originally scheduled to be butchered (Song). People have been generally impressed with how you’ve been pushing for more animal rights, but I believe it is now time for us to address the elephant in the room—the Korean dog meat industry.

In 2016, Mayor Lee Jae-myung of Seongnam City issued a decree to close down the dog meat vendors in Moran Market, the largest market for dog meat in Korea, estimated to provide a third of the total dog meat consumed in the country. All dog meat vendors and facilities are scheduled to be removed by 2017, ahead of the upcoming 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics (Kim, “How Did”). Just as we proved to the world that we had risen from the ashes of war and poverty during the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, I hope we can show them that we have overcome the corruption, scandal, and incompetence of our previous administration. But various interest groups are lobbying against the Olympics being held in Korea precisely because of our dog meat consumption, and I believe it is crucial to address this issue (Kim, “How Did”).

According to a report from the *Hankyoreh*, a widely circulated Korean newspaper, during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, local dog meat restaurants explicitly changed their menu items' names from *gaejanguk* (which literally means 'Dog Soup') to *boshintang* ('Soup for Helping the Body') or *yeongyangtang* ('Nutrient Soup'), in order to hide from foreign visitors the fact that they were using dog in the dishes (Kim, "80s"). I would also like to turn your attention towards a study published in the *Korean Journal of Food and Nutrition* (한국식품영양학회지, KJFN) by professor Ann Yong-geun. According to surveys conducted regarding the population's consumption of dog meat, 1,251 out of 1,502 Koreans had eaten dog meat before, with the ratio heavily skewed towards having eaten dog meat for all age groups except teens (for which the ratio was 1:1) (Ann). 50.7% had eaten dog meat because they simply ate what their family ate, as opposed to desiring it themselves (Ann). What is also notable is that, although the main reasons for not eating dog meat were that it was 'barbaric,' 'inhumane,' and 'unsanitary,' the main reasons for continuing to eat it were all related to cultural preservation and imperialism (Ann). But what does all this data even mean? It means that, as the government is slowly restricting the practice, people's thoughts are also changing. This is a good opportunity for the proposal that I have for you: regulate the dog meat trade, with the goal of slowly phasing it out entirely as the population becomes more averse to eating it. This may seem like a radical proposition, but allow me to explain.

As per the data, many Koreans believe that dog meat is brutally prepared and unsanitary. This isn't too far from the truth. In a report by SBS, a Korean news channel, a reporter went to a private dog meat farmer who operated from her own apartment. The dogs were packed together in filthy, small cages, and were riddled with diseases, while dead dogs filled up the freezer. Furthermore, the animals were killed in the open and often beaten alive to adrenalize and tenderize the meat (Han). Such barbaric practices should be reformed, and this applies to all livestock. I believe there must be as little suffering inflicted upon livestock as possible, and there should be sanitation standards to uphold. Furthermore, a large number of these dogs are strays instead of specifically being bred for food. The government does not regulate dogs the way it does other livestock, and therefore

dog meat is not bound by the sanitary regulations in place for pork and poultry, leaving it susceptible to higher risks of diseases that diminish the quality of the meat. Such deplorable standards are not sufficient for any kind of meat to be prepared and consumed, much less dog meat. However, if we were to regulate the production of dog meat, the Korean government could register official dog farms and butchers who would maintain transparent breeding methods and follow strict regulations on sanitation and butchering techniques. Not only would this regulation create new jobs, but it would prevent dogs from being severely abused, while people who still wish to continue consuming dog meat would have access to a cleaner, more humane option.

I would also like to raise a few points regarding the environmental impact of dog farming. An article from *TIME Magazine* shows that around 30% of the world's land is used to raise crops that we do not eat, but instead feed to livestock. This land also represents a third of our total water consumption as a species (Walsh). Cattle can require up to 2000 kilograms of feed to produce a single kilogram of beef, and produce up to 1000 kilograms of carbon-based greenhouse gases in doing so. In 2006, the Food and Agriculture Organization issued a report stating that livestock may account for around 18% of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide (Walsh). Korea is making efforts to promote sustainable development and renewable energy, but we haven't addressed our currently unsustainable agricultural system that uses an excessive amount of land, water, and natural resources to produce relatively miniscule amounts of meat while massively polluting the environment. Dog farming can only intensify this issue, considering that dogs themselves are carnivorous—meaning that they not only require land and water to be raised, but meat from animals that themselves require land, water, and crops to grow strong. In the current global climate crisis, we should do better to manage and gradually shrink our meat industry; farming dog meat only serves to put oil on the fire. Working towards regulation and gradual reduction is in our best interests in this regard.

To be clear, I am not advocating any moral reason to not eat dog. Often, critics of dog meat consumption are morally against it because dogs are bred as pets, and because of their high levels of intelligence

and ability to ‘connect’ with people, as ‘man’s best friend.’ These arguments do not hold for several reasons. For starters, dogs are not the only intelligent species of domesticated animal—according to “Thinking Pigs: A Comparative Review of Cognition, Emotion and Personality in *Sus Domesticus*,” a study from Lori Marino and Christina M. Colvin for the *International Journal of Comparative Psychology*, evidence “suggests that pigs are cognitively complex and share many traits with animals whom we consider intelligent,” yet they are massively farmed for meat. In addition, dog breeds such as the nureongi have frequently been specialized for food in many parts of Asia, where they are more frequently consumed (Ann). There is no distinction that separates dogs from pigs in terms of how permissible they are as food, except for the fact that most people in the West see dogs as pets and pigs as food. As *Slate* columnist Will Saletan comments in his article “Wok the Dog,” the argument of these critics boils down to: “The value of an animal depends on how you treat it. If you befriend it, it’s a friend. If you raise it for food, it’s food.” In short, the value is based on a non-fixed definition of what companion animals should be and what livestock should be. Cows are sacred in India, yet they are consumed in much of the world. Horses are often seen as work animals, yet they are commonly eaten in countries like France.

We are living in a world dominated by the West, and often we are subjected to their moral and cultural standards. It’s obvious that this form of cultural imperialism is a factor in criticisms of the dog meat industry, given that almost all of the countries with a long history of dog meat consumption are in Asia, with the top three being China, Vietnam, and Korea (Ann). Critics rally supporters to take dogs from Asia destined for the market and resettle them as pets in the West. Dog eating should not be understood by the West’s standards of morality. Ironically, these critics are the same people who are attempting to stop us from legalizing the industry. Instead of creating an environment that will prevent the needless abuse of dogs now, they are willing to let dogs continue suffering until Korea bans the trade outright, which is rather hypocritical for supposed animal rights activists. Since producing dog meat is neither banned nor explicitly legal, activists should be focused on how there are no standards that regulate the sanitation and wellbeing of the animals.

I support the aforementioned restrictions on the dog meat industry because I think we should pick our battles wisely—dog is not commonly eaten by a majority of the population anywhere, and if we can further improve our international image by helping to stop an already dying practice, it may be a sacrifice worth taking (Ann). Actress Brigitte Bardot (as well as Sepp Blatter, the former FIFA president) once said that dog meat is bad for Korea’s “international image” (김, 학민). The fact remains that until Korea becomes influential enough to define cultural norms, our traditions will be considered barbaric to outsiders, and it may be beneficial to simply move on to bigger issues. A state’s power is no longer solely defined by its military firepower, but by its cultural impact as well—and despite Korea’s growing cultural exports worldwide, we will not be able to shake off this negative image of eating ‘man’s best friend.’ I am not proposing regulations for moral reasons, but I believe my end goal is the same as the activists’.

There is nothing that dog meat offers that other meat does not and, while there are seemingly only disadvantages to eating it, there is much potential in first aiming to reduce its consumption. Even the better-known dishes that use dog meat in Korea have derivatives that are far more popular with the entire population (such as *yukgaejang*). But we are a free, democratic society, and some people will still want to eat dogs. Instead of either blindly bending to foreign demands for outright bans or tacitly approving the current abusive, unsanitary, and environmentally unfriendly methods of dog meat farming, Korea can find a middle ground that is a step towards reform. I know that you will have a lot of goals to meet in the coming five years and that this may not be something that you wish to prioritize. However, you have said before that you wish for Korea to make independent decisions for its own interests. The way I see it, this reform will not take too many resources or too much time to carry out, and has a great chance of satisfying a larger number of people. Therefore, I believe there is value in taking this proposal into consideration.

Sincerely,  
Jaehyoung Ju

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