



Comparative Analysis of Animal Protection in China and Spain from a Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract

In an era where global ecological concerns are of utmost importance, animal protection has emerged as a critical issue. China and Spain, each with its own unique historical, cultural, and social characteristics, have taken different routes in promoting animal protection initiatives. This thesis aims to compare the current practices of the two countries, identify the underlying factors causing the differences, and offer constructive suggestions for the development of China's animal welfare. Through an examination of policy frameworks, legal implementations, achievements, and enforcement challenges, the study explores the disparities originating from historical contexts, public awareness levels, cultural traditions, and professional training in educational systems. The research is significant as it broadens cross-cultural comparative studies and proposes practical measures to improve China's legal mechanisms. It encourages a change in societal attitudes towards animal welfare and sets new academic directions for implementation strategies. By promoting ethical treatment standards, this work aims to prevent animal cruelty and contribute to the preservation of ecological balance and biodiversity. Ultimately, the comparative analysis is intended to support sustainable development goals through enhanced international cooperation in animal protection. The findings can help create more animal-friendly environments and strengthen global partnerships in this vital field. This academic endeavor strives to bridge policy gaps and foster mutual understanding between Eastern and Western approaches to animal welfare challenges.

Keywords

Cross-cultural studies; animal welfare; legislative protection

1. Introduction

In today's world, as global ecological concerns intensify, animal welfare has emerged as a critical focus for the international community. Recent years have witnessed repeated instances of deeply troubling incidents that shock the public conscience. In this era of rapid information dissemination through digital platforms, we observe widespread mistreatment of animals by individuals who fail to recognize the severity of such actions. Many cling to the misguided belief that animals are inherently inferior to humans, arbitrarily harming innocent lives. This not only undermines the sanctity of animal existence but also exposes significant gaps in societal awareness regarding animal protection. China and Spain, two nations with distinct historical trajectories and rich practical experiences in animal welfare governance, present valuable case studies for comparative analysis. By examining their respective approaches, policy frameworks, and socio-cultural influences, we can identify crucial insights to strengthen China's legal infrastructure in this domain. Such cross-cultural examination holds particular significance for advancing ethical standards and regulatory effectiveness in animal protection initiatives. Moreover, it can also promote better global communication on animal-friendly concepts.

2. Overview of animal protection in China

2.1 Animal protection in ancient China

China's consciousness of animal protection traces back to the pre-Qin period, when early philosophies and governance practices began reflecting care for non-human life. Confucianism, with its emphasis on harmony between humans and nature and compassion for all living beings, established a moral framework for animal welfare. These teachings rejected the notion of human supremacy over the natural world, advocating instead for mutual respect, a perspective that resonates deeply with contemporary ideals of ecological balance.

By the Tang and Song dynasties, such ethical principles started shaping concrete policies. The Tang court, for example, banned the harvesting of bird feathers for ceremonial attire, while the Song dynasty introduced restrictions on reckless hunting and habitat destruction. These measures were not merely symbolic but represented early efforts to codify environmental stewardship.

The Ming and Qing dynasties saw rulers actively modeling ethical behavior. Ming emperors prohibited officials from consuming wild game. Over centuries, these evolving practices did more than protect animals, they wove a cultural fabric of responsibility toward nature. The accumulated legal precedents, philosophical traditions, and public norms from these eras formed a foundation that continues to influence China's modern approach to ecological ethics and animal welfare.

2.2 Current policies and laws in China

In 1988, China enacted its first Wildlife Protection Law, marking a significant step toward establishing a modern legal framework for animal conservation. The law introduced a tiered protection system for wild animals, imposing strict safeguards for rare and endangered species, and has been updated over the years to address evolving conservation needs. Complementary regulations, such as the Laboratory Animal Management Regulations and the Animal Husbandry Law, were later introduced to strengthen this framework.

The Wildlife Protection Law has undergone five amendments to date, including improvements to wildlife rescue protocols and requirements to ensure the health of animals used in public performances. These changes reflect incremental progress in China's approach to animal welfare (Yang, Qin, & Lin, 2023). The 2022 revision, the most recent, emphasizes enhancing wildlife habitats while balancing the sustainable development of related industries. However, the legislative focus remains largely pragmatic, prioritizing ecological stability and public safety rather than addressing the intrinsic welfare of animals as a standalone concern.

2.3 Achievements and challenges in law enforcement

China has made remarkable strides in wildlife conservation. The recovery of species like the giant panda and crested ibis highlights the success of habitat restoration, anti-poaching efforts, and heightened public awareness.

However, significant challenges persist in enforcing these protections. First, the country's vast territory poses logistical hurdles. Remote mountainous regions and border areas remain hotspots for illegal wildlife trade. Despite strengthened crackdowns, authorities face ongoing constraints in staffing, resources, and cross-border law enforcement.

Second, tensions arise between traditional customs and modern animal welfare values. In some areas, traditional festivals or cultural practices involve activities that seem to conflict with modern-day animal protection concepts. These traditional practices have deep-rooted cultural backgrounds and local significance, but they also come into conflict with the emerging values of animal welfare. For instance, Guilin's long-standing Lychee and Dog Meat Festival has drawn fierce opposition from animal rights groups and growing public criticism.

Critical questions remain unresolved: How can the legal sourcing of animals for consumption be ensured? Do breeding practices meet animal welfare standards? Addressing these gaps demands urgent improvements to legal frameworks and stricter market oversight.

3. Overview of animal protection in Spain

3.1 Legislative evolution of animal protection in Spain

In Spain, the bond between humans and animals dates back to prehistoric times. The striking cave paintings of Altamira, which depict hunting scenes and survival practices, provide a vivid glimpse into the profound relationship early

humans maintained with animals. This ancient connection, built on constant interaction and careful observation, laid the foundation for protective attitudes toward animals in Spain, later forming a cornerstone in the historical evolution of animal welfare concepts.

Spain's first specialized animal protection law emerged in 2003, enacted by the Aragon region. It aimed to address legislative gaps by defining protections for vertebrates, including pets, laboratory animals, and captive wildlife. This pioneering law set a critical precedent, influencing subsequent animal welfare legislation across the country.

Moreover, the European Union's legal frameworks have profoundly shaped Spanish legislation. Key agreements like the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty and 2007 Lisbon Treaty incorporated groundbreaking provisions addressing animal welfare, formally acknowledging animals' capacity for environmental perception and emotional experience, including pain and pleasure (Liu et al., 2012). This regulatory evolution has intensified debates about Spain's bullfighting tradition, particularly regarding the breeding practices and post-event animal treatment. In 2010, Catalonia's Parliament made history by banning bullfighting in the region, though Spain's Constitutional Court later overturned this prohibition. The 2023 ruling maintained that decisions about this cultural heritage fall under national jurisdiction rather than regional authority.

Spain's updated Animal Welfare Law marks a paradigm shift in legal protections, expanding coverage to all vertebrates and formally recognizing companion animals as sentient beings (Official State Gazette, 2023). The legislation introduces stringent anti-abuse measures with enhanced financial penalties and criminal charges for offenders, while implementing public education initiatives to foster ethical treatment of animals. This reform reflects growing societal demands for compassionate coexistence with non-human species while navigating complex cultural preservation debates.

3.2 Current law enforcement and practical challenges

First, it is concerning that the updated legislation continues to exclude bulls and hunting dogs from protective measures. Bullfighting particularly embodies the unresolved tension between modern animal welfare standards and cultural preservation efforts. This exemption reveals a persistent gap in aligning legal frameworks with evolving ethical expectations.

Second, while Spain's inclusion of all vertebrates in animal protection demonstrates progressive intent, practical implementation faces multifaceted challenges. The policy's ambition clashes with operational realities: diverse species require specialized care infrastructures that remain underdeveloped, and current veterinary resources prove inadequate for comprehensive oversight. Public attitudes further complicate matters, with social perceptions varying dramatically across species, from household pets to livestock. Rather than mere regulatory adjustment, this law essentially pressures Spanish society to fundamentally renegotiate its relationship with non-human lifeforms through institutional reforms, resource allocation shifts, and cultural value transformations.

4. Factors influencing differences in animal protection between China and Spain

4.1 Historical context and public awareness

In China, despite official statements supporting animal protection, the reality is that an anthropocentric view remains dominant. The perspective treating animals as mere tools has long prevailed. Throughout agricultural society's history, animals were commonly seen as secondary elements existing to serve human production and daily life. This utilitarian approach causes animal protection efforts to primarily focus on ensuring animals' practical value to humans, while neglecting their emotions and rights. Naturally, related legislation hasn't paid sufficient attention to the emotional companionship value that pet animals provide for humans.

In Spain, the Catholic cultural tradition has shaped an approach to animal protection that emphasizes equality and mutual respect for life. Animals are viewed as living beings with spirituality, whose emotional experiences and demands for rights must be seriously acknowledged and respected. In civil legal proceedings, protecting animal welfare helps maintain their asset value (González, 2021). This cultural and social foundation deeply influences Spain's animal protection laws and practices, where animals are defined as beings with emotions and independent rights in related matters. For example, the New Animal Welfare Law explicitly recognizes pets as having emotional significance, stressing that they are not merely human property but living creatures with feelings and rights.

4.2 Conflicts between food traditions and animal protection

Though awareness of animal protection keeps growing and laws are continuously improving in China, lingering effects of traditional dietary beliefs still exist and affect animal protection efforts in multiple ways. On one hand, some people blindly believe in the medicinal value and nutritional benefits of wild animals. On the other hand, they view consuming wild animals as a novel experience or a status symbol. Cruel practices like eating live monkey brains, which severely violate animal ethics, still persist (Zeng, 2011).

Additionally, China's huge population has formed a massive consumer market. Public demand for wild animal products fuels illegal trading. Due to significant differences in dietary habits across regions, consuming wild animals remains an important part of preserving traditions or social interactions in some remote areas. This increases the difficulty of supervision and complicates animal protection education. Therefore, changing traditional customs and promoting protection efforts is necessary.

Spain's food culture differs from that of China. With relatively well-developed agriculture and livestock farming, Spanish diets rely more on farm-raised animals, crops, and abundant fishery resources. This dietary tradition helps reduce related animal protection issues. For example, intensive pig farms prioritize animal welfare, ensuring they live in relatively healthy and comfortable conditions throughout their lives (Vázquez, 2023).

4.3 Education system and professional training

In China, regarding related fields and professional training, the traditional model of extensive farming is gradually being replaced by a more refined and sustainable approach with a focus on animal welfare (Cao et al., 2024). This requires professionals to not only master basic breeding techniques but also understand animal protection concepts, animal welfare, and other interdisciplinary knowledge. However, traditional education systems have overemphasized practical skills and inadequately taught related theories.

In contrast, Spain's education system prioritizes balanced development in these fields. In higher education, courses are well-designed to cover knowledge from multiple areas like animal biology, animal behavior, animal legislation, and policy, and trained professionals can contribute to all aspects of animal protection. Additionally, Spain emphasizes integrating animal welfare education into early schooling (Torres, 2021).

5. Prospects and suggestions for animal protection in China

5.1 Gradual improvement of the legal framework for animal protection

In the early stage, the focus should be on rare animals, pets, and species with high public visibility and concerning living conditions, such as pangolins. For wild animals, strict trade policies must be enforced. For pets, owners should provide suitable living spaces, purchases should require authorization, and medical records and tracking systems should be established. As society develops and public awareness grows, mid-stage efforts will expand protection to livestock like pigs, cows, and sheep. Importantly, whether evaluating animals raised for slaughter or future donors for lab-grown meat, their quality of life and value must be assessed based on specific animal welfare principles. Simply being alive or existing in large numbers doesn't mean an animal lives well (Liu & Wang, 2022).

In the advanced stage, the system will be further improved by gradually adding more species and creating detailed welfare rules for each, forming a comprehensive legal protection framework. When designing punishment mechanisms, public acceptance and practical enforcement must be fully considered. For serious offenses like illegal hunting and wildlife trafficking, offenders should be required to personally participate in animal protection work.

5.2 Promotion of the adjustment of traditional customs

When dealing with conflicts between traditional customs and animal protection, a tolerant and innovative approach is essential. Instead of completely dismissing traditions, we can find creative solutions. For example, in festivals where consuming certain animals is a custom, we can shift the focus by organizing storytelling sessions about the festival's origin, performing legends related to it, or showcasing traditional crafts, folk dances, and songs. These activities can preserve the cultural significance of the festival without harming animals.

Regarding the traditional animal performances, clear guidelines must be established to ban violent training and performance methods. Educational institutions and community centers can play a proactive role since they can launch educational campaigns to raise awareness about animal welfare. Through workshops and public lectures, people can

learn about the negative impacts of harmful traditional practices on animals. Additionally, promoting vegetarian or vegan alternatives during festivals can be an effective way to balance tradition and animal protection. This not only protects animals but also offers health benefits. By taking these steps, we can ensure that cultural traditions evolve in a way that respects the rights and well-being of animals, fostering a more harmonious co-existence.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study has achieved its goals by presenting the real situation and differences in animal protection between the two countries, as well as proposing practical steps for China to improve its animal protection efforts. This study proposed practical steps for China, such as improving the legal framework and adjusting traditions. Regarding the legal framework, we should expand protection to more species and design proper punishments. When adjusting traditions, we can change animal-related festival activities. These steps will help China safeguard animals better. The study also offers a valuable reference for future research in China and other countries with similar challenges because it gives a new perspective on cross-cultural animal protection research. Future research could focus on how different social structures affect animal protection and how to strengthen international cooperation in this area.

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