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Chinaâ??s controversial Yulin dog meat festival opens amid criticism

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The Yulin "Lychee and Dog Meat" festival, an annual 10-day event, commenced last week in southern Chinaâ??s Guangxi province. Held from June 21st to 30th, the festival sees the consumption of over 10,000 dogs. Alongside dog meat, the festival offers cat meat, fresh lychees, and liquor.

The festival has sparked significant controversy in recent years, especially in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. Both domestic and international criticism has mounted due to the inhumane treatment of animals and poor hygiene practices documented by activists. Reports include the public slaughtering of animals using clubs and the sale of dogs transported in unsanitary conditions, often identified as stolen pets with collars. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that the dog trade contributes to the spread of rabies and increases the risk of cholera.

Since its inception in 2009, the festival has been held to celebrate the summer solstice. In Chinese tradition, eating dog meat is believed to bring luck and good health during the summer months, ward off diseases, and enhance men's sexual performance according to folklore. While dog consumption is not illegal in China, and an estimated 10 to 20 million dogs are killed for human consumption annually, attitudes are shifting. The practice of consuming dog meat dates back at least 400 years, but dog ownership has become popular among China's growing middle class since the prohibition of keeping dogs as pets during the Cultural Revolution was lifted.

A growing movement against dog-eating festivals and the practice in general is emerging, led by animal activists, celebrities, and younger Chinese citizens leveraging social media to voice their opposition.

Accurate data on the number of dogs killed annually in the trade is difficult to obtain due to the practice being illegal in most countries, making it a largely secretive and underground activity. Despite efforts to crack down on the trade, millions of dogs

are estimated to be killed each year for human consumption.

Dog meat consumption is not limited to China; it is also practised in South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and certain parts of India. South Korea recently passed a bill prohibiting the slaughter of dogs and the sale of dog meat for human consumption, with violations punishable by fines of up to 30 million won and imprisonment for up to three years.

In South Korea, dogs are raised on farms for meat, whereas in China, there are no such farms. During the Yulin dog meat festival, pets and stray dogs are often stolen from across China and slaughtered for meat. Despite efforts to portray the event as a cultural festival, it is primarily a marketing initiative by the dog meat industry. In reality, most people in China do not eat dog meat.

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