Cultivating Compassion Across Communities

“Do you eat dog?” Growing up as a Chinese-American, this all-too-dreaded question came up frequently. While I could easily brush it off, the question always bothered me beyond its racial malevolence. In a conversation with my mother, I expressed my frustrations and she aptly pointed out, “Isn’t eating a dog no different from eating a cow, pig, or chicken?”

Forced to grapple with living this double standard, I made the decision to adopt a vegetarian diet, eventually embracing a vegan lifestyle by my freshman year. I was able to find a supportive community online through Facebook and on campus through the vegan club. My parents, on the other hand, struggled to understand why anyone would refuse to eat meat. To them, meat is a luxury that they are fortunate to have in every meal. They understood why I would cut out dairy, which is not an ingredient present in traditional Chinese cooking, as 95% of Asians are lactose-intolerant. However, their disapproval intensified after learning that I had become involved with animal advocacy. They accused me of being extreme, echoing the perspectives of many within the Chinese community who perceive animal rights as a Western concept and means of cultural imperialism.

At the same time, I found myself feeling like an outcast from the same vegan community that had once welcomed me with open arms. The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge of anti-Asian sentiment not just worldwide, but also in the vegan community. On Facebook, I encountered comments blaming the “Chinese virus” on the so-called “barbaric” practices of “people who will eat anything.” I could not help but feel dehumanized and considered giving up on animal advocacy as I began to comprehend the reasons behind Chinese culture’s skepticism of animal rights.

It was during my fellowship with the New Roots Institute that I reconciled these disparate narratives. As we discussed various readings, one specific insight struck me: the root of racism and other -isms lies in the human-animal divide, wherein the human and the animal are understood to be moral opposites. Thus, what dehumanizes marginalized people is not merely our race, species, gender, class, and so on, but rather that category’s perceived closeness to animality – the state of being animal-like and therefore less “human-like.” This insight became my lightbulb moment, suggesting that my advocacy for racial justice and animal liberation are one and the same.

Empowered, I undertook various projects that allowed me to explore these concepts in-depth. One project involved researching and writing an article uncovering the historical connection between anti-Asian racism and animal agriculture as highlighted by an American Federation of Labor pamphlet titled “Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood vs. Asiatic Coolieism, Which Will Survive?” Another entailed conducting a literature review on legal personhood for animals, revealing to me the paradox of animals and some humans being considered “property” while corporations, ships, and trusts are recognized as “persons.” Additionally, organizations like the Food Empowerment Project have launched initiatives such as their Vegan Chinese Food booklet, demonstrating that it is possible to embrace veganism while honoring cultural identities. My advocacy journey has underscored for me the urgent need to cultivate compassion and challenge ingrained attitudes across communities, not only to foster a more compassionate world for animals, but humans alike.
Works Cited

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