

The Impact of China's Biopolitical Approach to COVID-19 on Pets

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Abstract

Using the frameworks of biopower and uses and gratification theory, this article examines the treatment of pets in China during the COVID-19 outbreak and the role of social media in fulfilling users' social needs by facilitating discussions on associated animal welfare issues and mobilizing animal advocates to take action. The analysis focuses on how social media comments on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, have influenced public discourse surrounding the biopolitical governance of animals emphasized by the zero-COVID policy, which has helped maintain a strong sense of national consciousness in post-socialist China. The study centres on an isolated case of the killing of a corgi by a health worker in Shanghai and how it was perceived on social media. The findings suggest that much of the animosity demonstrated on Weibo towards the killing is centred around biopower, or the biopolitical governance of humans and animals that has more broadly prioritized human life over animal welfare in China's approach to COVID-19. In this way, social media has played a crucial role in mobilizing animal advocates to take a more prominent role in the emergency management of pets. The study concludes that China should consider adopting a standard operating procedure for pet care and rescue that includes pets in its humans-first disaster response and relief measures to develop a better and healthier national consciousness, fulfil the social needs of its citizens who value animal welfare, and strengthen its sense of national consciousness.

Keywords: COVID-19, China, animal welfare, emergency management, biopower

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Vpliv kitajskega biopolitičnega pristopa do covid-19 na domače ljubljence

Izveček

Pričujoči prispevek, ki je osnovan na teoriji uporabe in gratifikacije ter biomoci, raziskuje, kako so na Kitajskem v času covid-19 obravnavali domače ljubljence ter kako so družbeni mediji z razpravami o dobrobiti živali in vzpodbujanjem njihove zaščite izpolnjevali potrebe medijskih uporabnikov. Analiza se osredotoča na vprašanje, kako so družbeni komentarji na Weiboju (tj. kitajski ekvivalent Twitterja) vplivali na javni diskurz o biopolitičnem upravljanju živali v okviru politike ničelne tolerance do covid-19, ki je doprinesla k vzdrževanju močne nacionalne zavesti v postsocialistični Kitajski. Raziskava obravnava specifičen primer, ko je neki zdravstveni delavec iz Shanghai ubil korgija in kako so se na to odzvali družbeni mediji. Študija ugotavlja, da je sovražnost, ki se je ob tem uboju sprožila na Weiboju, povezana predvsem z biomocjo ali biopolitičnim upravljanjem ljudi in živali – ta politika je namreč dajala prednost človeškemu življenju pred živalskim. Družbeni mediji so tako odigrali ključno vlogo pri mobilizaciji zaščitnikov živali, ki so prevzeli bolj pomembno vlogo pri upravljanju domačih ljubljencev v izrednih razmerah. Raziskava se zaključi z razmislekom, da bi Kitajska lahko uvedla standardni postopek za nego in reševanje domačih ljubljencev, ki bi jih lahko v svojih odzivih in ukrepih za pomoč ob katastrofah obravnavala skupaj z ljudmi kot enotno skupino in bi tako razvila bolj zdravo nacionalno zavest, izpolnila družbene potrebe tistih svojih državljanov, ki cenijo dobrobit živali, ter s tem tudi okreplila čut za nacionalno zavest.

Ključne besede: covid-19, Kitajska, dobro počutje živali, krizno upravljanje, biooblast

Introduction

The opening-up policies in China's urban areas since the 1980s and 1990s have resulted in a 15% annual growth rate of pet ownership, making cities like Beijing and Shanghai significant pet sales markets (Chan 2018; Xinhua 2021). China has also established several facilities for adopting stray animals, such as the pet adoption service in Nanchang, which opened on January 18th, 2018, and coincided with an "Adoption Day" in 38 other Chinese cities, including Beijing and Shanghai (XinhuaNet 2018). Additionally, Qingdao, a major city in eastern China, held a campaign on March 29th, 2018, encouraging people to adopt stray animals instead of purchasing them (Li 2019). Animal welfare advocates in China are working to find responsible homes for animals in need, and these adoption campaigns are part of these efforts.

However, animal cruelty is on the rise in China despite the country's Buddhist and Daoist history, which emphasizes compassion for all living things as a manifestation of both religious beliefs. In particular, we cannot underestimate the impact that COVID-19 has had on companion animals in China. At the time of the

initial outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, Chinese state media reported that a dog owner in Tianjin had thrown his pet over the side of a building out of fears that it could spread the disease (Lockett 2020). In 2021, when decontamination workers entered a quarantined citizen's home and killed a pet corgi in Shanghai, the state media tried to assuage netizens' hostility by defining the episode as an isolated mistake, and claimed that in fact netizens sympathized with the front-line workers who had been working tirelessly to tackle COVID-19 (Ramzy 2021). On the 6th April 2022, as China battled with a new wave of COVID-19 following months of its zero-COVID policy, media reports began to emerge on Weibo—the Chinese equivalent of Twitter—about another significant incident of brutality towards a pet. The story shared online claimed that a pet corgi was dragged to the roadside to be killed by a health worker in a neighbourhood community in Shanghai (Bloomberg News 2022). According to media sources at the time, the dog's owners had tested positive for COVID-19 and the health worker was worried that the dog was also infected. After the dog was beaten to death, the local authorities merely stated that they would further communicate with the dog's owner and compensate him, and did not express further comments on this incident (Xuan 2022). As a result, this provoked dissatisfaction with the local authority's response and caused widespread and heated discussion among many Chinese people on social media.

Drawing on the frameworks of biopower and uses and gratification theory, this study explores how media posts on Weibo have influenced public discourse surrounding pet safety, rescue, and emergency management within the context of China's humans-first zero-COVID measures, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we examine how Weibo users sought to engage in discussions on Chinese social media with other animal advocates about animal welfare during this historic moment. From the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan to the recent relaxation of COVID policies nationwide in January 2023, the Chinese government has prioritized human life in its response measures (Ding and Zhang 2022). While pet culling incidents in China during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been isolated events conducted by health workers and not officially sanctioned by the government, they are indicative of the influence that China's historical biopolitical approach to life has had on the treatment of pets. However, social media discussions about the impact on animals as a result of this approach raise important questions about how China can better manage pets during times of national crises. Our study further highlights how social media has played a key role in mobilizing animal advocates to take a prominent role in the emergency management of pets, fulfilling their needs for social connection and self-expression among the animal rights community.

Overall, we argue that the mismanagement of pets during the COVID-19 pandemic in China has had a detrimental effect on the public perception of the government's ability to manage issues that extend beyond human concerns. This demonstrates that China needs to consider including non-human animals in its disaster response and relief efforts. To achieve this, we suggest that China should adopt a standard operating procedure for pet care and rescue that can be implemented across the country during natural and manmade disasters. Based on our analysis, we also provide possible solutions to better facilitate the emergency management of pets during future crises. This article will be of interest to scholars and policymakers concerned with animal welfare and pet ownership in China, particularly during natural disasters, pandemics, and other unforeseen events.

Context of Pet Management in China

China's Animal Welfare and Animal Epidemic Prevention

Numerous laws currently exist in China with regard to animal protection, including the Wildlife Protection Law (WPL) of 1988 (revised 2004, 2009), Regulations for the Administration of Affairs Concerning Experimental Animals of 1988 (revised 2013), and Regulations on the Administration of Domestic Dogs of 1980. Two draft laws that have yet to be adopted by law-makers also exist—the 2008 Animal Protection Law (APL) and the 2008 Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Law of the People's Republic of China (PCAL) (Sima and O'Sullivan 2016). The PCAL remains the most prominent draft proposal of China's animal welfare legislation (ibid., 2016). However, the fact that these remain draft laws demonstrates that China has not yet approved such animal welfare legislation, and needs to do more to protect non-human animals. Moreover, there is a further general lack of societal concern or knowledge about animal welfare among the Chinese population (Carnovale et al. 2021). Instead, China regularly enforces regionally and locally tailored regulatory frameworks in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which are aimed at safeguarding human interests in relation to public health and safety. These regulatory frameworks include the "single-dog policy" for households, and sporadic intensive care procedures (Feng 2018). These procedures have included, to name a few, poisonings of untrained or stray dogs that roam or foul public places in major cities like Beijing (Yan 2020); killings of stray cats that cause public concerns relating to noise and hygiene (Fan 2020); and animal beatings and electrocutions as part of large scale culling related to the rabies epidemic in Yunnan province (Watts 2006).

It is worth noting that China did reconsider its plan to kill all pets of COVID-19 patients in 2021 after facing an outcry from citizens (Morris 2022). However, a

health worker's brutal killing of a pet corgi in Shanghai on April 6th, 2022, while its owners were taken away for quarantine, sparked outrage on Chinese social media (Yan 2022b). This was one of several cases of animal cruelty during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Other reported incidents include local health workers killing pets in Jiangxi province, Hebei province, and in the cities of Harbin, Chengdu, and Wuxi (Ramzy 2021; Baker 2022; Zhu 2021). While the Animal Epidemic Prevention Law (AEPL) of 1997 (revised in 2007, 2013, 2015, and 2021) made unlicensed slaughterhouses illegal, it has also given officials the authority to kill pets showing symptoms of diseases like rabies (World Dog Alliance 2021). As per current laws, pet owners are required to leash, vaccinate, and register their pets with municipal authorities to prevent them from both attacking people and spreading contagious diseases (ibid. 2021). However, it is important to note that China's AEPL (as of May 1st, 2021) does not list COVID-19 as an animal epidemic type (Pkulaw.com n.d.a; Guan 2022). Likewise, the Law on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases (LPTID) does not cite or authorize measures such as killing pets (Pkulaw.com n.d.b; Guan 2022). In the absence of an epidemic control strategy in cities like Shanghai, district governments are required to notify the Shanghai Municipal People's Government and obtain its approval before implementing emergency measures, including the killing of animals (Guan 2022). Additionally, epidemic prevention and control agencies should provide tangible proof of animal infection through necessary examination for epidemic diseases, as well as notify the owner of the legal basis and their appropriate rights (ibid.).

The previous literature has highlighted the mismanagement and cruelty towards stray animals in China and its negative impact on the public perception of the government, even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (see Whyke and Lopez 2020). Since the pandemic, research has noted that provincial and municipal authorities in China responded to positive COVID cases by restricting access to public spaces and obliging people to remain in lockdown (Cai and Wei 2022). This response has consequently affected the public information on COVID-19 provided by the national government in managing the crisis (ibid.). Others have noted that the official response to COVID-19 in China has hindered the communication of public information by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in relation to companion animals (Ebenezer et al. 2022). Platto et al. (2022) suggests that this is mainly due to the pandemic being primarily focused on handling humans rather than pets in China.

At least 70% of new infectious diseases are believed to originate from wild animals, and these can spread to people and domesticated animals (Hassell et al. 2017). Given their prevalence in urban areas, companion animals play a crucial role in human-animal interactions. As of the end of 2018, it was estimated that 73.55 million homes in China's urban areas were pet-owning families, with 56.48 million of

these caring for cats and dogs. China's urban areas are now home to approximately 50.85 million dogs and 40.64 million cats (Duo et al. 2020). Because of the public's unavoidable exposure to so many pets in urban areas, there was widespread concern that companion animals may spread COVID-19. The question of whether pet ownership should be allowed during public health crises has also been widely debated. However, there is no concrete evidence that pets can transmit infectious diseases such as SARS or COVID-19 to humans (see Parry 2020). Therefore, China's response to COVID-19 in major cities like Shanghai has highlighted the country's failure to manage pets and provide them with the necessary care, particularly during natural crises, pandemics, and other unforeseen circumstances.

Animals, Emergency Response and Management, and COVID-19 in China

Companion animals are often excluded from emergency plans in urban areas worldwide (Kapucu 2012). This is due to limited or unattainable disaster relief policies that do not account for pets. As a result, studies have focused on examining the changes in human-animal relationships during disasters and how emergency management procedures are developed and implemented, including the evacuation and rescue of pets (Chadwin 2017). However, the shortage of evacuation options and safe places to stay make it challenging, if not impossible, for many pet owners to evacuate with their pets during disasters (ibid.). The safety of pets themselves during natural disasters like fires, floods, and hurricanes has also been studied (see Glassey 2018; DeYoung and Farmer 2021). Neglecting companion animals during national emergencies can have significant consequences, including people refusing to evacuate or be rescued out of fear for their pet's well-being (Day 2017), as well as post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological trauma due to forced separation (Brackenridge et al. 2012; DeYoung and Farmer 2021). As such, disaster-specific pet emergency plans may improve urban resilience and public health worldwide (Chadwin 2017).

The close relationship between humans and their pets has led many Western countries to include pets in urban emergency management plans. For example, the 2006 US Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act (PETS) was implemented after Hurricane Katrina. PETS aims to ensure that pet and service animal owners are taken care of during disasters by establishing a framework for emergency preparation at the national and local levels (Glassey 2018; DeYoung and Farmer 2021). PETS mandates that jurisdictions requesting federal funding under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act consider the needs of pet and service animal owners in the event of a disaster or

emergency (DeYoung and Farmer 2021). However, DeYoung and Farmer (2021) argue that the PETS Act has not had a significant impact, as local governments may simply include in their disaster management plans that pet owners are responsible for their own pets during disasters, which contradicts the spirit of the legislation. Additionally, PETS does not require hotels or shelters to accept evacuated pets, does not address pre- and post-disaster preparedness and resources needed for pets and pet owners, and does not consider disasters that give less time to prepare for pet evacuation, such as earthquakes. Therefore, DeYoung and Farmer (2021) suggest that the PETS legislation should be expanded to cover pets in more detail during the preparation of emergency plans.

“The Emergency Response Law of the People’s Republic of China (ERL)” (2007) was enacted in response to the SARS outbreak in 2003, and covers emergency planning, natural disasters, technological accidents, public sanitation issues, social security concerns, and recovery and reconstruction activities (Data Base of Laws and Regulation 2007). The law marked the beginning of a comprehensive strategy for disaster management in China, which included the establishment of an emergency management system with a hierarchical bureaucracy that prioritizes central government control (Hu et al. 2021, 2). However, the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 exposed issues in the system’s coordination between different regions and levels of government, as well as its ability to facilitate military involvement (ibid.). To address these shortcomings, reforms were implemented to improve coordination between local emergency management and other levels of government, including increased military and social participation in disaster prevention, response, logistics, and recovery (ibid.).

The rapid and effective public-health emergency response to COVID-19 in China was informed by the lessons learned from the SARS outbreak in 2003, and included timely pathogen identification and government policymaking, as exemplified by China’s zero-COVID policy (Zhu et al. 2021). This policy has entailed strict domestic measures, such as border closures, continuous mass-testing, and intermittent lockdowns since the outset of the pandemic, although it has not been without controversy and backlash (Davidson and Yu 2022). At the heart of China’s zero-COVID approach is the principle that “people’s lives are of utmost importance”, which has guided both national and local emergency responses to the pandemic (Yuan 2022). However, China’s emergency response to the pandemic did not include measures for the care of pets, particularly in the context of urban public health emergency management. This omission is linked to China’s historical biopolitical governance of animals and humans, which we will discuss in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

Biopower and the Biopolitical Governance of Animals (and Humans) in China

The official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) stated on July 15th, 2022, in response to the country's strict zero-COVID policy, that the Communist Party of China (CPC) has always prioritized people's well-being throughout its history, and that Chinese Communists are willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives, for the interests of the people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). President Xi Jinping further stated that safety and health are prerequisites for human development and progress (Xi Jinping in Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). Clearly, China's pandemic response prioritized biopower for the management of human life above all else. However, this approach failed to include the care of pets, particularly in urban public health emergency management, which is closely linked to China's historical biopolitical governance of animals (and humans), as we will now proceed to outline.

The term biopower, coined by Michel Foucault (2007), refers to a modern power technique that treats biological life and the population as objects. According to Foucault, biopower encompasses "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (Foucault 2007, 1). State control and political strategy, as argued by Foucault, constitute the security apparatus that decides who lives and who doesn't, in order to foster and improve life. The security apparatus is defined by Foucault as "those institutions and practices concerned to defend, maintain and secure a national population and those that secure the economic, demographic and social processes that are found to exist within that population" (in Dean 2009, 20). Thus, the state acquires regulatory authority over all forms of life, including the human species. The mechanisms, technologies, and techniques of biopower used to control the population (security mechanisms) constitute what Foucault calls biopolitics. Modern biopolitics does not deal with human beings as individuals but with humans as multiple bodies and the population as a whole (that is, as a species).

In Foucault's view, racism is a biopolitical form that is used to control the population. This is based on his argument about biopower and the contrast he draws between a life worth living and death. While Foucault emphasizes the "human species" in his definition of biopower, several scholars have extended the scope of this concept to include animal bodies, as noted by Vint (2010) and Srinivasan (2013). Jacques Derrida (2008) points out that philosophers such as Descartes, Heidegger, and Lacan fail to make a clear distinction between humans and animals, and challenges the binary between them by arguing that animals possess characteristics

that define humanity. Giorgio Agamben (2004) further complicates the distinction between humans and animals by highlighting the risk of exclusion from the human world. According to Agamben (2004, 26–27), the “state of exception” lies in the contrast between human and animal, human and inhuman, which is based on language or rationality, termed “the anthropological machine”, and serves as the conceptual basis for the production of humanity’s foundational inclusion and exclusion that produces “bare life”. This “bare life” is neither human nor animal, but rather a basic form of life that exists only within the “state of exception”. The creation of a biopolitical entity may therefore be seen as the earliest example of sovereign power in action, as it involves the regulation and control of life itself.

The concept of totalitarianism is closely related to modern biopolitics, as argued by Agamben (2004). Hannah Ardent (1976) also contends that totalitarian regimes of the 20th century epitomize biopolitical expressions of totalitarian rule. She suggests that the annihilation of people’s uniqueness and identity results in their transformation into human animals, devoid of individuality and difference, whose freedom is only defined by species preservation. This transformation, as well as the dehumanization and metamorphosis that come with it, becomes the central issue in biopolitical expressions of totalitarian rule.

Foucault’s concept of biopower is closely related to the previous discussions that view the distinction between humans and animals not just as a way of understanding knowledge, but also as a set of practices and discourses that have moral and political implications. In China, efforts to create a better human model by eliminating animalistic characteristics and defining a pure socialist state by excluding bestialized and dehumanized class foes from the country, both internally and externally, are not new.

One of China’s earliest forms of biopolitical animal governance was the Patriotic Nationalist Health Campaign (*aiguo weisheng yundong* 爱国卫生运动) in the 1950s. In response to perceived US germ warfare, the campaign aimed to improve sanitation and hygiene, mobilizing people to kill insects believed to spread diseases. Rogaski (2002; 2004) argues that this program was a form of warfare against germs in Northern China’s cities, which enabled the CCP to portray itself as possessing cutting-edge scientific knowledge. This campaign was part of a broader effort to promote nationalism, encourage broad participation, and eliminate adversaries.

Similarly, the Four Pests Campaign (*chu si hai* 除四害) was a large-scale biopolitical regulation of animals that was initiated to protect grain and promote modern health concepts. This campaign targeted rats, flies, mosquitoes, and sparrows. Both campaigns were connected by a common theme: the promotion of nationalism and the elimination of adversaries, which resulted in animals disappearing from both the habitat and consciousness of the Chinese people in the name of modernity.

Mao Zedong's war against nature and various species used slogans like "Cut Off the Tails" (*ge wei ba* 割尾巴) and "Man Must Conquer Nature" (*ren ding sheng tian* 人定胜天) (see Lippit 2008). The concept of the Socialist New Man in China drew a line between apes and humans and between capitalism and socialism, which prioritized the latter. During the Maoist era, humans (as a species) needed to be tamed to shed their animalized tendencies before the socialist human model (socialist modernity) could be created.

Since China's rapid economic development from the 1970s onwards, biopolitical governance of animals has continued. Habitat destruction and the loss of important ecosystems, including wetlands, forests, and grasslands, have resulted in the decline of many species and the loss of important habitats and resources. Despite efforts to conserve biodiversity, many species in China are still being over-exploited for food, medicine, and other purposes, leading to the decline of some animals and the loss of important genetic and ecological resources (Zheng and Cao 2015).

Historically, culling animals has also been used to prevent disease spread in the belief that it restores balance and protects humans (Lu 2021). The aim of this approach is to prevent diseases from spreading from animals to humans, safeguard public health, and maintain social stability. The Chinese government has implemented animal quarantine measures, including movement restrictions and the destruction of infected animals, established surveillance systems to monitor animal health, and controlled the sale and transportation of animal products (Zhang 2019). For instance, during the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak, China implemented measures such as culling civet cats (which were believed to be the natural reservoir of the SARS virus) and closing wildlife markets, as part of a larger effort to control the spread of the disease and prevent a wider epidemic (*ibid.*). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, China once again employed biopolitical strategies to manage animal populations, such as suspending the trade and consumption of wild animals and implementing strict regulations on the movement of animals (Koh 2021). Although incidents of pet killings appear to be isolated events conducted by health workers and not officially sanctioned by the Chinese government, they do demonstrate the impact that China's historical biopolitical approach to animals had on the treatment of pets during the pandemic. Overall, China's historical approach to the biopolitical management of animals during infectious outbreaks has been characterized by a combination of traditional beliefs and modern scientific methods, shaped by cultural and economic considerations, as well as by the need to prevent the spread of disease and protect public health.

Our article explores the impact of biopolitical mechanisms on animals and humans under China's zero-COVID policy, and critiques the absence of emergency

management measures that include pets during emerging infectious diseases. To achieve this, we investigate the motivations and behaviours of animal advocates on Weibo, as well as the role of social media in promoting collective action and social change. Our goal is to enhance the understanding of social media's potential in promoting animal welfare advocacy in China, particularly during periods of national crises when resources for protecting animals are scarce or unavailable.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Since the 1940s, the uses and gratification theory has stood out from other effect models of media research that emphasize the powerful influence of the media on its audience, such as the hypodermic needle model or agenda setting. This framework proposes that media users are active participants (Liu 2015). The pioneer of the theory, Katz (1959), suggests a shift from asking “what do the media do to people?” to “what do people do with the media?” This approach recognizes that viewers are active agents who make conscious choices about the media they consume, based on their personal identity, information-seeking and social interaction needs, as well as their need for entertainment (Blumler and Katz 1974).

Taking this into consideration, Blumler's (1979) concept of an active audience highlights the purpose and utility of the media (utility), the audience's cautious choices (intentionality), and how they selectively appropriate media in ways that align with their interests, values, and goals (selectivity), as well as how audiences can reject media impacts (imperviousness). Lin (1999) suggests in uses and gratification theory that users engage with media not only to fulfil specific psychological or social needs, such as social interaction or escapism, but also to search for emotional gratification (psychological and environmental), which can concurrently happen during their exposure to media.

Uses and gratification theory also implies that users have self-awareness when choosing a media outlet (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974), particularly in a new media ecology where old and new communication channels compete with each other. Therefore, since the emergence of online communities, the characteristics of uses and gratification have also been studied in other fields of communication research, such as computer-mediated communication and social media (Lee and Ma 2012).

Digital uses and gratification have also been studied in the context of social media, highlighting the significance of the time spent and information-sharing on these platforms, as well as the use of social media for self-expression, social satisfaction and affection, and inspiration (Quan-Haase and Young 2010; Krause, North, and

Heritage 2014). However, Hsu et al. (2015) caution that uses and gratification theory is not universally applicable and that specific settings and cultural backgrounds need to be taken into account when applying it to social media. Furthermore, recent research has focused on the uses and gratification theory in new content-generating sites, where users employ these new technologies with ideological motivations (Kaye 2010). This has led to the emergence of virtual communities that are active in cross-examining traditional media, engaging in debates with like-minded individuals, and mobilizing sentiments to shape public opinion and influence political decision-making.

In our study, we aim to investigate how Weibo users engaged in discussions surrounding animal welfare on Chinese social media during a significant moment in Chinese historical biopolitical governance, and thus understand the role that social media played in mobilizing animal advocates to take an active and prominent part in the emergency management of pets during the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring the motivations and behaviours of animal advocates in the online space, we aim to shed light on how social media can serve as a platform for fulfilling individuals' needs for social connection and self-expression within the broader animal rights community. Through our research, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which social media can be leveraged to promote social change and support collective action in the realm of animal welfare advocacy in China, particularly during public health emergencies.

Methods and Materials

Quantitative Content Analysis

Quantitative content analysis involves creating and using predetermined categories to count and quantify media messages (Manganello and Blake 2010). In this study, we employed word cloud analysis to examine the most frequently used keywords in both media posts and user comments on Weibo related to the focal corgi killing. This method allowed us to visualize the most prominent topics and keywords in a large number of social media texts (Hubert et al. 2020). By analysing related posts and public discussions of the event, we aimed to investigate the focus of the discussions.

The collection of sample data in the study was divided into two stages, which produced two subsample groups for word cloud analysis (see Figure 1). In the first stage, we gathered Weibo posts that were focused on the media reportage of the dog killing event in Shanghai. We primarily conducted a pilot data collection

and identified that the majority of Weibo posts discussing the dog killing event were published between the 6th to 12th of April 2022. Therefore, based on this timeframe, we used the Weibo search engine and collected all of the 7,077 Weibo posts from the search result of the Chinese keyword “*Shanghai Keji*” (上海柯基, Shanghai Corgi). These posts either contained the Chinese keywords “Shanghai” (上海) and “*Keji*” (柯基, Corgi) simultaneously, or were identified to be relevant to the event of “*Shanghai Keji*” (Shanghai Corgi) by the Weibo search algorithms. In the second stage, with the intention to analyse the public response to the event, we further collected 1,333 accessible user comments under five chosen Weibo posts published by different news organization that reported the event with the same content, which constitute subsample B. The clarification of the data source can be found in Table 1. Finally, the texts in two subsample groups were processed to generate two word cloud visualizations. After the data cleaning process that combined duplicate keywords, two visualization figures were finalized. Both data collection and the word cloud visualization were performed in Python. It is important to note here that widespread news of the killing of this dog event appeared exclusively on the Weibo platform, according to our extensive internet search at the time.

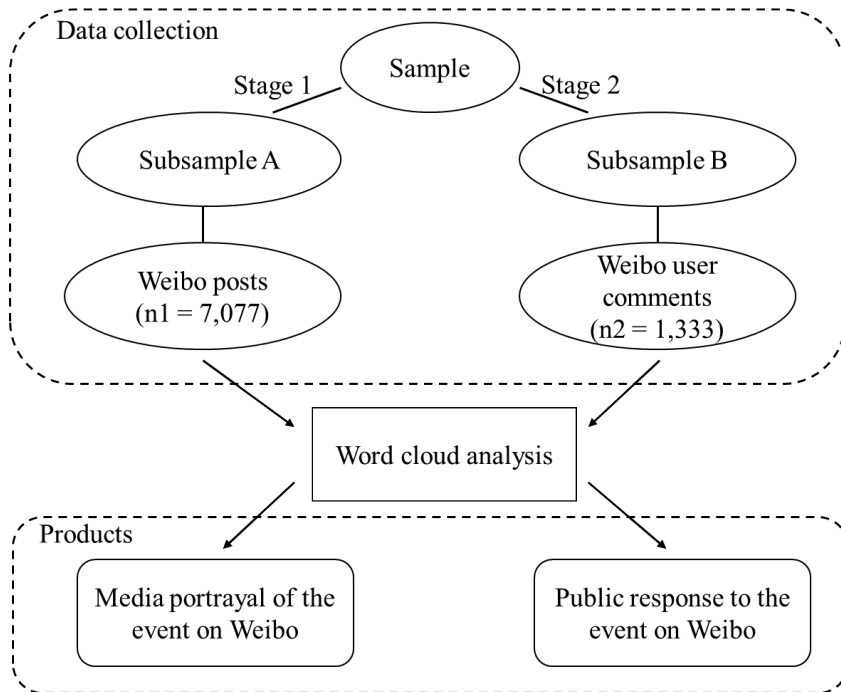


Figure 1: Quantitative analysis procedure. (Source: Authors)

Table 1: The data sources of Weibo posts in subsample B. (Source: Authors)

Authors of the 5 Weibo Posts	Accessible comments	Link
NetEase News (网易新闻客户端)	348	https://weibo.com/1974808274/Lnf47lxtI
Xinjiepai News (生活报)	93	https://weibo.com/1898885525/LnkwZ9wXz?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment
China Newsweek (中国新闻周刊)	263	https://weibo.com/1642512402/LnjbguniE?rfer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment
Anhui IFeng (凤凰网安徽)	386	https://weibo.com/5119282557/LnmzSnzLV?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment
Xiake Island (侠客岛)	243	https://weibo.com/5476386628/Lnja7AlyV
Total	1333	

Qualitative Content Analysis

According to White and Marsh, qualitative and quantitative content analysis researchers sample text to choose relevant text for their purpose, but qualitative researchers focus on the uniqueness of the text and are aware of the multiple interpretations that can arise from close perusal of it (White and Marsh 2006, 36). Altheide suggests that qualitative content analysis enables researchers “to capture the meanings, emphasis, and themes of messages and to understand the organization and process of how they are presented” (Altheide 1996, 33). The meanings and interpretations are then analysed and interpreted in relation to the context in which they are produced (Bryman 2004). To comprehensively explore the uses and gratifications of media messages pertaining to the corgi killing incident, it was necessary to supplement quantitative analysis of word frequencies with a qualitative content analysis. This approach enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of how these messages were perceived by the public and how they served to satisfy their social needs. We identified two prominent social needs: the space for social media users to voice their concerns regarding China’s biopolitical stance on pet

emergency management during the pandemic, and the utilization of social media platforms to mobilize like-minded animal welfare advocates to enhance pet emergency management efforts. These nuanced expressions and attributes of the content would have eluded detection by means of purely quantitative analysis, hence underlining the value of this qualitative approach. To execute the qualitative analysis, we curated media posts and user comments that exhibited a high degree of congruity with the identified quantitative keywords. Through this targeted approach, we gathered a diverse yet representative sample of content that effectively captured the spectrum of user sentiments and opinions concerning the corgi killing incident.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results



Keyword	Frequency
pet	3,136
owner	2,608
quarantine	2,207
pandemic	1,831
killing	1,669
side of the road	1,458
neighbourhood	1,233
life	991
neighbourhood committee	794
positive	783
animal	762
response	756
epidemic prevention	561
Shenzhen	557
staff	546
victim	534
compensation	524
management	487
cruel	429

Figure 2: Word cloud of media posts on Weibo. (Source: Authors)

the subsequent response from the local neighbourhood community regarding the controversy were also widely mentioned. Keywords such as “epidemic prevention”, “management”, “staff”, and “virus” were also frequently used, indicating the importance of epidemic prevention and management strategies and the role of health workers in relation to the media portrayal of the tragic corgi killing. Additionally, “response” and “compensation” were also emphasized, highlighting the attention given to the response by the Shanghai local authorities.

In Figure 3, the word “compensation” was one of the top three salient keywords mentioned, indicating that many Weibo users were discussing the compensation provided by the Shanghai local authorities as a response to the corgi killing. Furthermore, in the user comments, the words “cruel” and “thoughtless” were often used, which were also present in the original post that depicted the event as a “thoughtless act” (NetEase News 2022). This suggests that a significant number of social media users were dissatisfied with the health worker’s treatment of the pet. Additionally, user comments often included the word “human” in their response to the health worker’s treatment of the dog, indicating that their discussions focused on the situation of pets in the government’s humans-first response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The similarities between both word clouds are noteworthy, as “pet” is the most prominent term in both figures, indicating that the public perceived the pet as the most crucial subject in the event. Furthermore, special attention was also paid to the legitimacy of killing the dog as a result of China’s epidemic prevention and management measures for positive COVID-19 cases, as both word clouds contain terms such as “positive”, “epidemic prevention”, “management”, and “quarantine”. Therefore, it can be inferred that the killing had triggered the public to be more aware of issues relating to pets during the COVID-19 pandemic, including emergency management, animal welfare, and pet ownership.

Moreover, it is important to note that the term “Shenzhen” was also frequently mentioned in both Weibo posts and comments. During the pandemic outbreak in Shenzhen, a pet care centre was established for pet owners who were in quarantine by local authorities, which won a lot of approval from the public (Shenzhen Daily 2022). By comparing the positive pet management practices that other cities had adopted during the COVID-19 outbreak, the public was further aware of the existing problems in the emergency management of pets in Shanghai, emphasizing their disappointment with local authorities.

Qualitative Discussion

In what follows, Weibo user comments are further qualitatively analysed and thematically structured in response to the five chosen Weibo media posts below published by different news organizations that reported the event with largely the same content. Two themes were identified: China's biopolitical approach to the emergency management of pets during the pandemic, and social media's role in mobilizing animal advocates in the emergency management of pets.

China's Biopolitical Approach to the Emergency Management of Pets during the Pandemic

Posts-1, 2 and 3 (NetEase News, Xiaoke Island and China Newsweek):

4月6日，上海浦东。网友爆料疑似一位养柯基犬的主人一家三口被带走隔离，因家中无狗粮且无人，抱给居委会无法接收且拒绝重新带回家。主人思考过后放生，不料放生后被工作人员拿铁锹拍几下后一动不动，最后疑似拿塑料袋拎走处理。拍摄者录视频时说“太残忍了”。#居委会回应柯基被拖路边处理#：考虑不周，会给予主人赔偿。

On April 6, a corgi dog was pulled to the side of the road in Pudong, Shanghai. Netizens revealed that a corgi owner's family was taken away to central quarantine facilities. Because there was no dog food and no one at home to take care of the dog, they took the dog to the neighbourhood committee. But the committee did not accept it and the owner could not take it back home. After careful consideration, the owner released the dog. But unexpectedly, after the release, a health worker beat the dog with a shovel several times, after which the dog died. Finally, it was suspected that the staff took away the animal in a plastic bag. "That's too cruel," the photographer who recorded this video said. # The neighbourhood committee responded to the Corgi being killed on roadside #: it was a thoughtless act and we will compensate the owner.

Post-4 (Xinjiepai News):

4月6日，上海，网曝浦东曹路某小区一只宠物柯基被工作人员拖到路边处理。#居委会回应柯基被拖路边处理#，工作人员称，因为这家有阳性病例，当时担心宠物狗会传染。当时确实考虑的不是非常周全，之后会和宠物狗主人进一步沟通，会给予对方赔偿。

On April 6, Shanghai, netizens revealed that a corgi was dragged to the side of the road by a health worker in a community in Caolu, Pudong district. The neighbourhood committee responded to the corgi being pulled to the side of the road for disposal. According to a member of staff, because there were positive cases in the family, they were worried that the pet dog would infect them. At that time, their consideration was not very comprehensive, and they will further communicate with the pet dog owner and provide compensation.

Post-5 (Anhui IFeng):

4月6日，上海。浦东某小区因主人阳性，一柯基被拖到路边打死，柯基主人与涉事居委会均作出回应。

April 6, Shanghai. In a community in Pudong, a corgi was dragged to the side of the road and killed because its owner tested positive for the coronavirus. Both the owner of the corgi and the neighbourhood committee involved have responded to the incident.

The sample Weibo posts mentioned above have been widely shared on the platform and provide a brief summary of the dog killing incident, including concerns that the dog may have spread COVID-19, the absence of protection for the corgi by the neighbourhood committee, the committee's response to compensate the dog's owner, and the shocked reaction of onlookers to the brutal act.

The Weibo posts give a glimpse of the corgi killing incident, and the following user comments provide additional insight into the public's reaction. The comments reflect the widespread anger towards the act of animal cruelty, as well as a concern for the lack of animal welfare laws. Additionally, the comments highlight the impact of China's biopolitical approach to managing pets during the COVID-19 outbreak, which prioritized human life over that of animals.

如果一定要让人类生命的价值凌驾于一切之上，那就应该明白你们口中高贵的人类要有保护小动物的责任，高贵的人类比一切生灵都更应该拥有人道主义，任何时候都要尊重所有的生命。

If we value human life above everything else, we should understand that the so-called noble human should have the responsibility to protect animals. Human beings should adhere to humanitarianism more than all other creatures, and respect all life at any time. (User-1)

这不是第一次有宠物因为疫情而被杀死。上海柯基事件，我能理解大局为重，但说实话我很心痛。

This is not the first time a pet has been killed because of COVID-19. As for the Shanghai corgi incident, I understand the need of putting the interest of the whole [humankind] above everything else, but to be honest, it hurts. (User-2)

令我愤怒的是，官方媒体发布了几篇关于疫情期间宠物可能传播新冠病毒给人类，并间接造成了人们的恐惧。

It also angers me that state media has spread fear by releasing several reports about the possibility of animal to human infection during the COVID-19 pandemic. (User-3)

希望能够真正的完善动物保护法，虽然宠物可能会传染，但也希望能尽所能的好好对待，宠物也是一条生命!!!! 不要再让这样的事情发生了。

I hope that the animal protection law can be truly improved. Although pets may be contagious, I also hope that we can do our best to treat them well. The life of pets also matters!!!! Don't let that happen again. (User-4)

最重要隔离管控，动态清零，与应急处置不去完善，对着无辜的动物喊打喊杀。难以置信这是国际大都市上海。

The most important things, quarantine control policies, zero-COVID policy, and emergency management are not improved, while innocent animals are shouted at and killed. It is hard to believe that this is the so-called metropolitan city Shanghai. (User-5)

Overall, these comments provide insight into the intricate and multifaceted relationship between humans and animals, as well as the competing interests and values that came into play during the pandemic. They demonstrate how social media platforms enable individuals, especially animal advocates, to express their emotions, seek information, and engage in social interactions. These individuals utilize their comments to advocate for policy changes, increase awareness about animal rights, and express their frustrations and disappointments with the institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on animals. The

comments highlight the dynamic and fluid nature of human-animal relations, which are shaped by cultural, political, and ecological factors. They reflect a range of perspectives on the value of life, from an anthropocentric perspective that prioritizes human interests to a biocentric perspective that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms. Additionally, the comments reveal scepticism and criticism of institutional narratives and a desire for accurate and transparent information. The authors question the accuracy and intent of state media in creating fear around animal-to-human transmission of COVID-19.

These comments underscore the complex and often conflicting attitudes towards animal protection, human health, and institutional narratives. They also emphasize the need for a balance between human and animal interests, with one user calling for the improvement of animal protection laws while acknowledging the potential risks of pet ownership. Furthermore, there is criticism of the prioritization of pandemic control measures over animal welfare, with disbelief expressed at the treatment of animals in a major city like Shanghai. As such, this case highlights the significance of a multidisciplinary approach to comprehending human-animal relations in China, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting such an approach can help bridge the gap between different perspectives and facilitate more sustainable and equitable forms of coexistence between humans and non-humans.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and National People's Congress (NPC) have proposed the enactment of animal anti-cruelty and protection laws, which have received widespread public support. However, despite these proposals, such laws have not yet been approved (Sima and O'Sullivan 2016). The recent killing of a corgi in Shanghai considered in this article highlighted the urgent need for animal anti-cruelty and protection legislation in China. It also raised concerns about the lack of a standard operating procedure for the emergency management of pets, including their care and rescue during disasters. The negative discourse surrounding the killing of the dog in Shanghai was driven by the disappointment of Chinese netizens with the government's failure to care for pets due to the country's humanistic zero-COVID pandemic control policies. This failure also affected pets in other isolated instances during the pandemic (Yeung 2022; He 2022).

The political legitimacy of the CCP has primarily been used to enforce policing strategies for the protection of human populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethical guidelines for animal protection in China are thus situated within a complex network of interlocking party relationships that involve the deployment of anthropocentric biopower, a phenomenon not unique to China (Cao and

White 2016). The creation of a human-animal divide during this recent health crisis is also not new in China, as evidenced by the Patriotic Nationalist Health Campaign and the Four Pest Campaign in the 1950s. Similarly, the pandemic has revealed the post-socialist state's governance of animals (and humans) through the biopolitical mechanism of Foucault's "apparatus of security". This is evident in China's emphasis on "human progress", "people's wellbeing", and "protecting people's lives", which are at the centre of its zero-COVID policies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2022). To expand on Foucault's theory but with the new Chinese post-socialist state in mind, the distribution of the human population on a large scale highlights the security apparatus through which the biological human is first subjected to governmental control and political strategy under the pretext of enabling and enhancing human life. In theory, the CCP has applied the Confucian humanistic concept of "governance" to its pandemic approach, but in doing so has failed to incorporate thousands of years of Daoist thought regarding the management of nature, society, and life to find a harmonious middle ground of reciprocity between humans and non-humans. As a result, China's COVID-19 disaster response efforts underscored the absence of an overarching "humanimal" emergency management system and legal framework to ensure that humans and animals are cared for equally.

The killing of the corgi due to COVID-19 prevention measures examined in this article exemplifies a dysfunctional bureaucratic negotiation structure between official humanistic power and animal welfare (or lack thereof) in China. This is a consequence of the biopolitical mechanism present in the strong anthropocentric discourses surrounding the zero-COVID measures at the official level. These include the recommendation from the Chinese CDC expert Dr. Li Lanjuan that pets should be separated from the human domain by remaining indoors and away from potentially contaminating conditions, as well as the state media's provocation of a pathological fear of pets by commenting on the possibilities of animal-to-human infection. Thus, we can see how the biopolitics of the Chinese state media during the pandemic also extended to the wider treatment of animals. This resulted in the Chinese government's failure to stipulate what happens to pets when owners who are classified as close contacts of positive cases are quarantined, or when owners with severe symptoms are hospitalized (Ho 2020).

In China, the AEPL has primarily focused on preventing, controlling, and eradicating animal epidemics for the sake of human interests such as economic security, public health, and safety, with little attention given to animal welfare (Pkulaw.com n.d.a). This approach has led to the establishment of formalized protocols for the prevention or killing of animals that can spread infectious diseases to humans, despite the fact that the LPTID does not reference or permit the killing of pets

during pandemic outbreaks (Pkulaw n.d.b). Scholars like Chadwin (2017) and DeYoung and Farmer (2021) argue that emergency management planning should go further to include pets, as this would strengthen communities during disasters, including public-health emergencies. This is particularly important in China, where the brutal killing of a corgi in Shanghai illustrated the dire consequences of failing to incorporate pets into an overarching emergency management framework during public-health crises. Instead of addressing the real issue of caring for pets during the COVID-19 crisis, in Shanghai the local authorities resorted to compensating the owners of pets who were killed, demonstrating their humanistic response through “infrastructural power” (Man in Chu 2014). However, the local authorities failed to listen to the voices of pet owners and ignored the wider concerns of the public. The compensation package offered by the Shanghai authorities highlighted the official anthropocentric biopower of China’s political administration, which manages humans but fails to account for non-humans.

In conclusion, to ensure the welfare of pets and the interests of pet owners during public-health emergencies, the Chinese government must establish an overarching emergency management framework that includes pets. This would not only benefit non-human animals but also help alleviate the concerns of their human counterparts, whose mental health and safety are as important as their physical safety during disasters.

Social Media’s Role in Mobilizing Animal Advocates in the Emergency Management of Pets

宠物主人请互相支持，如果您的宠物在隔离期间独自在家，请将您的姓名地址添加到以下数据库。

Pet owners please support each other, add your name and address to the following database if your pet is alone at home while you’re in quarantine. (User-6)

我知道上海有一个当地的宠物保姆服务中心务叫Spare Leash，该中心将在您隔离期间照顾你的宠物。

I am aware that there is an animal sitting service centre called Spare Leash in Shanghai, the centre will look after your pets while you’re in quarantine. (User-7)

大家自发组建了一个争取上海宠物方舱的群，里面理性讨论怎么给上海也像深圳一样申请一个宠物方舱，那时候深圳也是狗友争取来的，并不是主动给的，现在里面的律师请大家搜集签字的，请支持的朋友签名声援，谢谢！

We have taken the matter into our own hands and formed a group to fight for setting up a pet shelter in Shanghai, in which we will have a rational discussion about how to apply for a pet shelter in Shanghai like in the case of Shenzhen. The pet shelter in Shenzhen was also fought for by dog lovers, rather than the local authorities taking the initiative. Now the lawyers in the WeChat group are asking everyone to collect electronic signatures, and please sign your name if you support us, thank you! (User-8)

深圳为上海树立了一个很好的榜样，为主人被隔离的宠物设立了第一家宠物护理中心。这得到了地方政府的资助。我在成都也看到过这样的例子。

Shenzhen has set a good example for Shanghai to follow by setting up their first pet rescue centre for pets whose owners are in quarantine. This was supported by local government funding. I've also seen good examples of such things in Chengdu. (User-9)

有没有人看到上海一位和尚在疫情期间收养动物的新闻？

Did anyone see the news about the Buddhist monk in Shanghai adopting animals? (User-10)

我正在转发这个消息，有人以为他们在疫情期间收养了一只狗，但事实证明那是一只浣熊。

I am reposting this news of someone who thought they had adopted a dog during the pandemic, but it turns out it was a racoon. (User-11)

The comments presented in the case study highlight the diverse needs and gratifications that social media can fulfil for animal advocates in China during times of national crises, ranging from seeking advice on pet care during quarantine to seeking social support from the pet community. The transformative role of citizen journalism via social media tools and individual citizen content creators, leading ordinary citizens to seek social justice, has been discussed by Wall (2019), while

DeYoung and Farmer (2021) argue that social media can be helpful in crisis scenarios such as disaster planning, fostering animals, reuniting missing pets with their owners, and fundraising.

In response to the humans-first disaster response of the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media users took to their platforms to support affected pets and pet owners. This transpires in light of animal rights ethics, centring around the notion that animal lives have the same rights and intrinsic values as human lives (Cui and Xu 2019). This demonstrates the potential for social media to provide a sense of empowerment and agency, as users take action to organize and advocate for the animal cause. The case study illustrates the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the relationship between people and their pets during the pandemic, and the potential for social media to facilitate communication, organization, and advocacy towards more sustainable and equitable forms of coexistence between humans and non-humans.

The comments also highlight how social media can serve as a platform for information-sharing and mobilization towards a common goal, such as advocating for the creation of pet shelters in Shanghai. Weibo users encouraged people to contribute to a database circulating on social media, which took record of pet owner information, allowing pets to be taken care of while their owners were in quarantine. Other social media users urged people to contribute to the circulation of an application for a pet shelter in Shanghai. Shanghai residents also gathered together in their thousands to support Spare Leash, a local animal rescue service centre, to prevent mistreatment from occurring during the pandemic, such as the killing of the corgi (Hamer 2022). The active role of Chinese netizens on Weibo reinforced the transformation of communicative power from being “others” to being “actors” during times of epidemic uncertainty. This further demonstrates how social media influenced animal lovers to engage in sporadic animal activism where local and national authorities failed to take actions to make pet owners feel safer and protect their pets during the pandemic.

Chinese social media users have also lauded recent animal activism efforts among the public to protect pets during the COVID-19 pandemic. One such example is a Buddhist monk in Shanghai who has been rescuing stray dogs from the streets since 1994. During the pandemic, he had taken in nearly 8,000 dogs at his temple and shelter, along with a number of cats and birds (Landsverk 2021). Furthermore, news from Chinese state media emerged of a Shanghai resident who adopted a stray “puppy” during the pandemic, only to find out after two months that it was actually a raccoon dog, and the animal was then sent to the Shanghai Zoo for professional care (XinhuaNet 2022). Shanghai

pandemic control workers were also encouraged to follow the example of their counterparts in Chengdu, where they fed a cat whose owner was in quarantine (Ding and Guo 2021). Additionally, cases of COVID-19-related pet care were reposted for animals whose owners were sick and undergoing quarantine in other Chinese cities. For instance, local authorities in Shenzhen announced the opening of the city's first government-funded pet care centre aimed at protecting pets affected by the pandemic. The centre operated as a domestic animal sitting centre, facilitating the placement of pet caregivers with pet owners during periods of quarantine (Shenzhen Daily 2022).

These discussions on social media reflect the growing debate surrounding animal rights violations in contemporary China, particularly in light of the pandemic and the decision by some individuals to kill pets in the name of national security. The use of Weibo by animal-loving netizens during the pandemic demonstrates a form of social engineering that was influenced by animal rights actions offline. Activists argue that animals have intrinsic rights and value, and should be considered as subjects of a life (Regan 2004). Despite the lack of pet-specific disaster plans from either the national or provincial governments in China, public debates on animal ethics have raised officials' understanding of the importance of including animals in urban public health emergency management.

Some government officials in China have taken steps to rein in overzealous efforts to prevent the epidemic and educate the public on the importance of animal protection. In 2022, over 30 representatives submitted a draft pet law to the National People's Congress, aimed at promoting humane treatment and the reasonable regulation of pets (Diao 2022). During the peak of the pandemic, China's state-run media made a concerted effort to persuade the public not to leave or harm their pets. Similarly, management agencies in Xi'an were warned by the Public Security Bureau during the COVID-19 crisis to stop enforcing a ban on pet breeding, consider animals in their epidemic prevention strategies, and refrain from killing pets without reason. In 2022, a member of the National People's Congress encouraged people to take care of their pets instead of abandoning or mistreating them during the pandemic. Congress also discussed the societal issues caused by the widespread presence of pets and the lack of regulations regarding their treatment during pandemics (Yan 2022a).

Overall, the evidence suggests that the public's growing concern for animal welfare has the potential to influence Chinese policymakers to adopt a more ethical approach towards pets in the context of urban public health emergency management. Undoubtedly, social media has played a significant role in this development.

Final Thoughts and Possible Solutions

This article has discussed the significant role of Chinese social media in raising public awareness about the mistreatment of animals during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the lack of explicit policies and guidelines for pet care during disasters has contributed to negative public sentiment in this regard. Weibo has served as a platform for stimulating discussions on animal welfare, highlighting the anthropocentric approach of China's emergency management and disaster response, and prompting debates on the moral implications of prioritizing human safety and compensation over animal life. These discussions also challenge the biopolitical split between humans and animals that underpins the state's control over biological bodies, as well as the distinction between essential and expendable lives. Social media users have called for a disaster response that prioritizes the protection and rescue of animals, as seen in the Weibo discussions about pet care and rescue during the pandemic. The case of Shenzhen is a notable example of local authorities and residents coming together to save pets that may be left behind when their owners test positive for COVID-19. This article highlights the importance of social media in driving public discourse on animal welfare and promoting the development of more comprehensive and morally acceptable policies for pet care during disasters in China.

Overall, this research suggests that the Chinese government needs to take action to protect pets during emergency situations, such as natural and unnatural disasters, as highlighted by the instance of animal cruelty during the COVID-19 outbreak in Shanghai and other cities. To achieve this, several solutions can be considered. Firstly, China should introduce pets into its Emergency Response Law to provide statutory protection for pets and their owners during emergencies. Emergency managers and officials should facilitate a safe separation and return for pets and pet owners as soon as securely possible, to avoid distressing and cruel separations. This is known as the “do no harm” approach, as suggested by DeYoung and Farmer (2021). Secondly, communication between state media and pet owners should be improved by avoiding baseless claims about animal-to-human transmission during health emergencies like COVID-19, without official scientific evidence to back them up. This will help to reduce the potential separation of pets from their owners by health workers, which can cause trauma. Thirdly, China should continue to improve its unified system of emergency management, with increased community involvement to prevent the detrimental effects of pet-owner separation prior to disasters and better handling of pets during the recovery stages of national crises. Encouraging social media use among citizens, especially animal activists, can become a space to promote discussions on how to manage pets during national emergencies, particularly health

crises. In conclusion, it is important for the Chinese government to take note of the significance of animal welfare and the role of pets in emergency situations. The suggested solutions can help to protect pets and their owners during emergencies, and improve the overall system of emergency management in China.

We know that the connection between people and pets is strong, but China needs better policies to reflect this connection during times of national crisis, as this would help pet owners facing the potential separation or loss of their animals. The pandemic has sparked a meaningful conversation about animal rights between Chinese civil society and the state, prompted by social media demands. This conversation can lead to the development of future animal protection legislation with a focus on proper animal welfare in China, including the management of pets during national crises.

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