

SEARCHING FOR ANIMAL UTOPIA

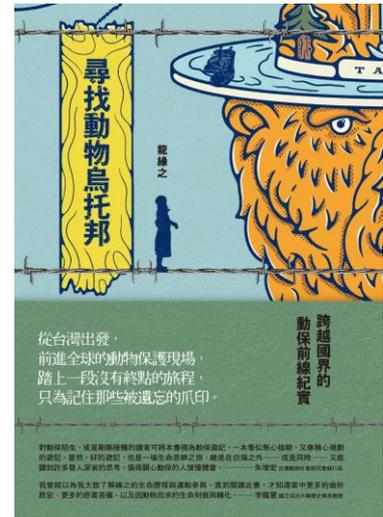
尋找動物烏托邦：跨越國界的動保前線紀實

Animal protection warrior Lung Yuan-Chih has traveled to countless locations around the world as an advocate for animal rights and to show her concern for the relationship between humans and animals. Lung's biting, insightful commentary on her lived experiences leaves much for the reader, and all humankind, to consider.

Zoos and circuses are both cute and deadly. In *Searching for Animal Utopia*, author Lung Yuan-Chih investigates the current state of and challenges to the global animal protection movement while giving her readers insights into the complexities and various facets of this movement via her lived experiences in Taiwan, China, Japan, and Scandinavia.

Particular attention is given to how regional and cultural mores shape how “animal protection” is perceived and practiced in different countries. Beyond graphic depictions of the cruel realities of animal-exploitative business such as China’s live bear-bile abattoirs and traveling circuses and Europe’s fur farms, Lung paints an in-depth, critical portrait of the effort invested by many animal rights advocates. Her treatment of this issue doesn’t shy away even from spotlighting the heavy psychological burdens and exhaustion regularly borne by frontline volunteers. *Searching for Animal Utopia* further delves into the role of religious groups in the movement, detailing the problems of captive animal releases and sanctuary farms, allowing readers to better appreciate both the complexities and the critical importance of the animal protection movement.

Much more than a litany of the works of animal protection activists, this book is a heartfelt call to action. Lung hopes her retelling of what



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she has seen and heard firsthand inspires readers to launch their own journeys into exploring and better understanding the relationship between humans and animals as well as to actively work toward equitable coexistence.

Lung Yuan-Chih 龍緣之

Lung Yuan-Chih, an experienced animal rights advocate and author, currently serves on the board of the Taiwan Human-Animal Studies Institute and as an Asia Region ACTAsia representative. Leveraging her significant field research experience and academic research skills, Lung launched the Animal PepTalk media platform in 2019 and has been recognized with an annual award from the Culture and Animals Foundation.

SEARCHING FOR ANIMAL UTOPIA

By Lung Yuan-Chih

Translated by Serena Ye

Prologue: Flying and Rock and Roll

Action is born out of curiosity. I arrived alone in Beijing on the fifth day of the Spring Festival in 2008, beginning a journey of almost ten years. I first rented a room in Yanbei Garden at Peking University. There were three cats in my apartment – one, Koko, had been adopted by my roommate in Taiwan, while the other two were staying with me over the winter break. Maybe cats get lonely spending a whole winter break on their own. Arriving at the Soviet style townhouse on the side of the 5th Ring Road in the evening with my cumbersome luggage, I opened the door nervously with my freezing hands and turned on the light. The three cats in the teeny-tiny living room were purring and wandering about.

Beijing Belongs to Us

When I first arrived in Beijing, my days spent together with the cats weren't completely lonely. When I sat in front of the computer, Koko was always on the desk with me. But naturally, I still wanted to meet new friends here, longing to get to know a place other than home inside out, and looking forward to one day being as comfortable and sophisticated as an "old Beijinger". As I was on the campus of Peking University, I inadvertently came across a post on the "Weiming Bulletin Board System" from a student club called the "Vegetarian Culture Association" announcing an upcoming animal-protection-themed rock and roll performance. Having never been to a bar before, I was pleasantly surprised, and for a whole week, pleaded with the only female high school student I knew in Beijing to come with me to see this group of young rock performers who were vegetarians and animal protectors.

Before the day of the event, I scoured the internet for information about the organizers. It turns out he was a stick-thin man in his early thirties with a big forehead and long hair tied back into a ponytail who had written a lot on his blog about his experience going vegetarian. Just like me, he had chosen vegetarianism to reduce harm to animals. His blog also had many photos of him living with cats. He looked to be living true to the title of an article about him published in a Japanese magazine: "Cat and Man, Conjuring the Magic of Happiness". His disposition seemed vastly different from that of Taiwanese men, with a determined and daring look about him. This sense of distance from cultural unfamiliarity, while being ideologically resonant, attracted me.

At 8 p.m. on the night of the performance, we arrived at Lanqi Ying in the Haidian District. There were two rock and roll bars there, situated next to Peking University and Tsinghua

University, but none of the people coming in or out seemed to be students. One of the bars, D22, looked fashionable. The space inside was narrow, long, and poshly lit, but I didn't spend much time looking around. The other, 13 Club, was more old-school, hidden from view without much decoration, and had a simple stage. The square "rock area" in front of the stage was already crowded with people in seats that formed an *n* shape around the stage, as well as in the grandstand on the second floor, which was where the Animals are Friends performance that I had come to see had already begun. The bar area was filling with smoke, and the entrance was lined with the strips of plastic used as insulation in all shops around here. The thick smoke stung my eyes, and I couldn't hear clearly how the song being performed related to animal protection, but I was moved by the host's conviction when talking about the tragic situation of bear bile farming and of the cruelties done to other animals. The long-haired man named Xie Zhen, dressed in a red shirt and red pants, was the lead singer of Overnight Youtiao, a band from northeastern China. He and the other musicians were all vegetarian. My attention zeroed in on him, and, outside the bar, I worked up the courage to introduce myself and we exchanged emails. Xie Zhen was the first friend I made in Beijing.

The following Sunday, Zhen invited me to go to Tuanjiehu with his friends to "discuss the overall situation of animal protection". It was bright and sunny in Beijing that day, with no dusty winds. There were friends from Dandong in Liaoning, Hebei; and Zhen was from Anshan. There were men and women with different dialects, builds, and appearances. It all brought a sense of newness for me. It turned out that Animals are Friends was a public welfare group just recently founded by Zhen from the Overnight Youtiao band members. Performing as an underground band, they planned to first make an impact on the capital's somewhat rebellious and impressionable young people, starting with issues such as cat and dog meat, fur and leather, and bear bile farming, so that people can gradually gain an understanding of animal protection and plant-based diets. Animals are Friends hadn't hosted many performances yet, but planned to expand to other provinces to tour, and Overnight Youtiao composed music in the Chinese pentatonic scale, with recent works all related to animal protection. I listened with great relish to them talking about the philosophy of the band and animal protection, as well as their lives in Beijing and their hometowns. There was also a girl they had met on the bus who volunteered to help with costume designs after hearing about their ideas on animal conservation. It seemed that Zhen and his friends didn't miss any opportunity for publicity. They had a passion I had never before witnessed. We were a few young people sitting in Tuanjiehu Park, discussing the new age of revolutionizing society through music and increasing awareness for the spirit of animal protection.

During that time, I got to know Zhen's friends. There was the trueborn Beijinger Xiao Shu, who was short, small, and feisty, with phoenix eyes and a long head of hair always with a straight fringe. She rode her bike all across Beijing, and I jokingly said she was Nezha¹. There was Tang Jing from Nanchong, Sichuan, a postgraduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. She looked Tibetan, was very blessed by the Buddha, and had a thin figure with an expression that

¹ Translator's note: Nezha is a deity with extraordinary powers in Chinese mythology, characterized by his energetic and passionate personality.

exuded both persistence and feminine gentleness. Shi Ya from Anguo, Baoding, Hebei was almost 170 cm tall. She didn't give off much of a city girl vibe, but radiated independence and gave me the impression of being a Chinese feminist intellectual. I hit it off with all of these girls. Zhen's "brother" Lin Fan had unusually large eyes and a sense of mighty and serious masculinity about him. He was the band's drummer. I also got to know the band's guitarist, Madman, a cute and innocent boy who was four years older than me and lived in Beijing. We later dated for four years. The bass player, also from the northeast, was Chu Xinzhi. Zhen invited me to go with him to pick up Xinzhi from the Beijing West Railway Station one day. Even small matters like this felt novel to me. There are so many people in China, and I had never seen this many people. With these new friends I made, it was as if Beijing was beneath our feet; the streets belonged to young people, and its future was also ours.

Vegan Utopia

Zhen rented a small house with a courtyard in the outskirts of Beijing, located in Fenghuangling, for RMB¥1,000 (about US\$142) a month. From the Summer Palace public transit hub in the northwest corner of Beijing, it took forty minutes to an hour to get there on the 346 bus. The body of the bus was divided into two parts. The road after the 5th Ring Road was bumpy, and had to inch forward, making the acrylic windows rattle tremendously, as if mimicking the adversities of life. Over the next two to three years, I often caught this bus, rockily making my way to Zhen's place to see him and his friends, cats, and a wolfdog named Pang Pang that had long been trained and adopted by the yard's owner. Sometimes, I brought toys for the cats, and other times I brought some daily necessities for my friends. I also collected some bracelets, jade jewelry, and other things to compensate these young idealists, hoping my friends might sell them for a bit money outside of their performances. However, I was not observant enough to notice that Zhen took to wearing the jewelry I left with him. That small courtyard housed a myriad of my hopes and dreams, pure and unwavering; the people there were like my family in Beijing, and I'd often go there to eat, and do the dishes too. On the first night, Lin Fan said that everyone sleeps on the same bed like brothers and sisters. Beijing was really cold during the night, and there was no indoor heating. Young people like us were always thinking of ways to save money. Whatever we wore during the day, we wore at night as well. No one had a nighttime routine – they just got on the bed and lay down in their clothes. Beijing was dry and dusty, and water was a commodity in perennially short supply in that region, so many people showered only once in a while. But even so, no one had much of a body odor.

Most of the young rock and roll Beijing drifters lived in the suburbs of Beijing, just like the Old Summer Palace's painter's village of old. In the years that followed, I got to know more of these artists, musicians, poets, underground journal editors, and others. At the time, rent in Beijing was still somewhat reasonable, and concrete apartments between the 5th and 6th Ring Roads all went for about RMB¥800 to 1,000 per month. Further out of the city from where I lived,

there was even less urban planning, with a lot of illegal construction being carried out in the middle of the night. Alleyways were often dirt roads, and smelt of excrement. There were also many people who urinated in public – even I could name a few. In fact, the name of the place, where Yanbei Garden of Peking University was located, was called “Saoziying”², with the sign next to Old Summer Palace, located in the middle of the two major gardens of Old Summer Palace and Summer Palace. Apparently, this place is where they used to dump the urine for people in the Old Summer Palace, hence the name.

Life then was simple and happy. My family still supported my expenses away from home, and, apart from preparing for graduate school, my time was my own. In addition to attending shows in Beijing centered on animal protection, Zhen invited me, along with several other girls, to go on tour with them to Shandong, and we traveled with the band to Jinan, Tai’an, and Qingdao. The minibus took me through the northern countryside, small towns, and unfamiliar cities. Some performance venues were discos, while others were unregistered nightclubs not much bigger than a single room in buildings that looked unsafe. Each place had their own “small animal protection societies”, which surprised me. It wasn’t until much later that I realized some societies were operating outside their means. The group that invited us to perform in Shandong had sold their office dog on the internet to raise money. We talked and laughed along the way, while also often solemnly discussing the heart-wrenching stories we’d heard about animals. We discussed the grave situation at livestock farms, including the suicide of a dog who had been heartlessly abandoned, and the tragic death of Lin Fan’s parents, who died of gas poisoning while making meat stew for him. It was when I frequently saw “dog collection” ads on utility poles in the countryside that I realized eating dogs and selling one’s own dog to butchers was so prevalent in the suburbs of Beijing.

I stopped eating meat in my second year of college, but still ate some dairy and egg products. Zhen and his mates didn’t eat any animal products at all, nor wear fur, leather, or down. I quickly adopted this philosophy, became vegan, and ditched all my leather shoes. When my college classmates from Taiwan, I-Chih and Pei-Yin, came to visit me in Beijing, I proudly introduced my group of friends. We also toured Tianjin together so everyone could experience the life of young people in the north, spending nights in bars, restaurants, and many a spare room. I-Chih half-jokingly said to me that he’d heard that Western rock bands often took girls with them on tour, who assisted during the day and slept with the band members at night. In China, they called young girls like that “*guo er*”³. I couldn’t care less because, in my heart, my friends had integrity and were full of dreams, and weren’t like that at all.

We sometimes met some extraordinarily distinctive people, like the “fruit-eating superhuman” who could eat raw lemons. Another young girl we met had taught Buddhism to thousands by the age of ten and had a sizeable following. Zhen insisted that he could fly, but no

² Translator’s note: Literally translated to “Camp Stinks-a-Lot”, the name derives from the odor associated with the place.

³ Translator’s note: This is a Beijing slang word literally meaning “fruit”, commonly referring to young women who like rock bands.

one had ever seen him do it. He also had some other skills I can't now remember, but some people liked to joke that he looked like a Taoist.

During those years, I also wanted to do what I could for animals. Outside of studying, I spent most of my time with my Animals are Friends mates and did volunteer work on occasion with different grassroots or international organizations. I felt that everyone was looking for opportunities everywhere, in all sorts of ways, to influence and transform society through strict veganism and animal rights activism (strictly speaking, these two terms had not been popularized at the time), particularly by promoting less meat consumption.

Shared Animosity Among Young Animal Protectors

In retrospect, I used to rely heavily on this group that revolved around Zhen. I genuinely wished for its long-term progress, so I wanted to support them in every way possible. I bought a handheld DVR and wanted to film a documentary with these friends as the main characters. One or two nights every week, my group of friends and I would play in bars all over Beijing, and, while the guys were on stage singing for the animals, I would be filming off stage while other girls took photos. The underground music venues we frequented included Hao Yun, Liang Ma Qiao, Yugong Yishan, The Salt of Thin, and 2 Kolegas Bar. There seemed to be a lot of passionate young people like us. Tickets cost about RMB¥30 each, but the bars and sponsors took most of the revenue. In total, each band member earned about RMB¥15 to 30 a day, enough to carpool home after midnight shows. Whenever Zhen and the others missed the late-night bus back to Fenghuangling, they would stay at my rental place for the night. I was always happy about it, and even let Zhen give QQ and Kaka vaccines he'd bought online. It was unbelievable now that I think about it.

There's a concept in the rock world called 3X: No smoking, no drinking, no promiscuity. I once thought this was basically the attitude Zhen and his friends had toward life. It was true we didn't drink much, but Lin Fan sometimes smoked quite heavily and had a lot of troubles. He said the only thing we lacked was money. If we had money, he said, Animals are Friends could tour everywhere and spread the message of animal protection to young music enthusiasts, who would then take this message far and wide. Aside from the issue of never having enough money, I felt like everyone was helping us find opportunities. College professors recruited students to volunteer for our cause, and spoke at and endorsed our events too. Many international animal protection groups such as People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Animals Asia Foundation, Swiss Animal Protection, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Compassion in World Farming, as well as ACTAsia, where I would later work, had offices or representatives in Beijing. Animals are Friends partnered with many of them to organize events. Sometimes the events were grand, attended by respectable Beijing bands, but resulted in local police cutting off water and power on the day of the performance.

In Beijing, the political center of China, it seems that any ideology could be considered subversive. No events can be held on June 4th, nor on June 3rd. What about June 5th? No one knows

for sure. To some extent, *Animals are Friends* was quite successful, having been reported on by CCTV and Beijing Radio and Television Station. Apparently, in terms of length and content, what had aired on CCTV alone was worth approximately 100,000 RMB (about 14,209 USD) in promotional value, an incomprehensible amount to many of us at the time. China Daily also reported on Xie Zhen at great length, publishing a full-color photo in the center of the page of Zhen standing face to face with a bear at a Sichuan black-bear sanctuary that had recently been ransomed by an animal protection group from a bear farmer.

During those years, what most affected our activism was probably the Chinese government's scruples about vegetarian activism. One CCTV reporter told us "higher-ups" had warned that, because Falun Gong also promoted vegetarianism, the state media could not discuss the issue. We could talk about protecting animals, but not specifically which animals, which issues, and what changes needed to happen. We didn't know which ideas the government deemed "sensitive" either, and were also playing the ambiguity game ourselves. The many times the government ended our shows by abruptly cutting off water and power during the performance, while disheartening, strengthened the underlying animosity shared among my friends toward the common enemy. Perhaps it is precisely the extreme minority and maverick nature of a cause that a true sense of group identity takes shape. Later, it seemed that Zhen was able to achieve success anyway. A woman donated two million RMB directly to him to run a home for stray cats for her. He also gained the support and trust of international groups. Laptops, projectors, cars, you name it – he lacked for nothing. More often than not, Zhen was out networking. He told me earnestly that he spent most of his time pondering the future of *Animals are Friends* – what we were going to do, and how we were going to do it. He released his first solo album – I sang harmony on it – and performed at colleges in various provinces, which attracted many student fans who then joined up as volunteers.

"You", Are Just Different

Every winter, cat meat dealers in Beijing roam the city's neighborhoods to catch cats using sparrows and bamboo hats before sending them to Hebei for slaughter. The meat is eaten and its fur can also be sold. Cats could be obtained easily from street vendors, bought online, or picked up directly on the streets. The number of cats in the city had rapidly increased, and their killing and mistreatment were rampant. At Peking University where I lived, several tragic incidents would happen every year, and there were always indignant students demanding justice for cats. But the university didn't expend any effort dealing with those matters. The Beijing municipal government issued "spaying and neutering certificates" through animal protection groups, allowing people to bring stray cats to designated veterinary hospitals for free sterilization surgery. My friends and I went to different places to catch cats. Some cats were released into safe neighborhoods after being spayed, while others who belonged to those close to us had the opportunity to be adopted. At the time, what we most needed were veterinarians who were

competent, good communicators, and able to cooperate with animal protectors; many of Beijing's veterinary hospitals were as dilapidated as community laundromats, sorely lacking in both experience and management.