Bettering the Pig Life before the Plate in Asia

The alarming conditions of the Porcine Industry in China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam, and how to give these pigs a voice

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Authors: Jamie So with Julie M. Fagan PhD.

Although Asia is a seemingly far off continent in which their farming industry has little relevance to the U.S., the issues they are tackling can hit close to home quite quickly. Zoonotic outbreaks of SARS and H1N1 were the beginnings of global epidemics that proved that the way in which livestock and animals are handled is much more important to human health than we thought. The animal welfare and management in the countries of China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam continue to fall short of Western standards and with global trade markets and travel becoming more and more commonplace, action must be taken immediately to prevent another global disease scare. Housing in close quarters, cruel living conditions and inhumane culling practices are only some of the issues that are currently being brought to light in the Asian porcine industry. By the use of animal welfare groups in these countries, a community action project can be undertaken to establish an official farm animal welfare organization to educate the public on meat origins and health risks and diseases associated with improper meat handling.

Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_PBYN9xIk

The Shortcomings of Pig farming in Asia

With the growing globalization of our world, Asia has made large breakthroughs into the livestock and meat production industry in its respective countries. Booming populations, increased resources, and improved nutrition and dietary habits have helped to contribute to a new insatiable demand for meat products in China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam. However, a common standard is lacking in the regulation of livestock animals in some of these areas, particularly those that are developing countries. The uprise of these economies has caused governments to see the benefits of establishing themselves a meat producer for their own populations instead of importing meat from elsewhere, following suit of many Western countries. The United States Department of Agriculture has taken steps to regulate the meat products that enter the country through quarantine and health requirement rules and protocols. Even with the recent 4.7 billion dollar Smithfield takeover by Chinese company Shanghui International, Smithfield’s CEO has continued to assure the public that no meat will be imported from China (1). However, there is much skepticism and concern that food safety regulations could be compromised regardless and fear that policies may change in the future in which meat may be exported to the U.S. Additionally, meat from overseas may become mixed in frozen food products, and since labeling laws are not consistent among all countries, we may not even know where the meat has been raised. Unfortunately, much of the meat industry overseas is poorly regulated as many governments cut corners and try to cover up health violations in order to
preserve their economies. More specifically, the porcine industry continues to meet a high demand of pork products all over the world, but these operations often face overcrowding situations which can lead to disease transmission and contamination of meat. Governments face not only economic obstacles, but also ethical and cultural obstacles as animal welfare is a very recent and mainly unbroached issue. The majority of local welfare programs abroad focus on companion animals, and this continues to stunt the progress of livestock regulation. By spreading this knowledge, more research can be done alongside veterinary and healthcare professionals to develop proper livestock protocols. With the proper support and evidence, the farm animal welfare organizations can then urge authorities and lawmakers to implement permanent change to improve the lives of these animals and the meat production that follows.

**China**

China’s pork industry continues to grow with an increasing demand domestically and abroad. With its many resources, seemingly unlimited manpower and widely arable land, China’s pig growth can be sustained for much of the upcoming years. The recent urbanization influx has also facilitated easier access for the population to obtain meat products, particularly fresh meat over frozen meat on a more regular basis. While meat was originally reserved for the wealthy, China’s now growing middle class has developed an unquenchable demand for the less expensive meat, relative to the price of beef. According to recent studies, the demand for pork has increased between 4% and 7% each successive year (2). Instead of importing pricier pork products from outside countries, China has now shifted their focus inward into developing their own porcine production. However, due to China’s drive to meet the increasing demands for pork, regulations and policies are rarely established and those that are often go unknown and ignored. The trend for leaner cuts of pork has driven breeding problems as production animals encounter a “mismatch between their genetics and the environment provided” (3). In order to satiate the Chinese appetite for pork, farm sizes have increased at alarming rates, and many farms employ a farrow to finishing system, which houses large numbers of pigs that are kept together in close quarters (2). The farrow to finishing system is particularly detrimental in the case of disease transmission, as animals of varying ages will be in contact with each other, and animals of every life stage can be affected. These conditions facilitate the transfer of disease at alarming rates, and since there is a weak veterinary and animal care infrastructure, outbreaks continue. Viruses such as, PRRS virus, PCV2 and CSF virus are circulated among the herd (2). Additionally, viruses are not contained on one farm, as animals are often exchanged between farms as breeder animals, which propagates the spread of such viruses to other areas and animals. Unfortunately, it is noted by experts that unless the housing system is reformed, other changes to policy and disease control will be of little use, including vaccinations (2).

In the realm of disease control, the Chinese government has implemented a program that gives farmers free vaccines for their herds to treat two specific viruses that have particularly plagued Chinese pig herds (2). The CSF (classical swine fever) virus and foot and mouth disease travel rapidly amongst herds and can have varying effects on pigs based on age. This makes it extremely difficult to detect, which further propagates transmission and calls for an urgent need to spread out and separate different age groups of the animals. Additionally, the government has been particularly successful in the compensation of pigs that need to be culled due to disease, which solves the problem of farmers avoiding culling of sick pigs in order to reduce profit loss
In order to provide the governments with vaccines, many pharmaceutical companies have arisen, but in both the governmental and private sectors. Because a common standard is lacking, the effectiveness of such vaccines that are supplied vary depending on the manufacturer and this then leads to an inconsistency of treatment and disease prevention.

The lack of knowledge in the field of pathology, microbiology, and epidemiology continues to contribute to the propagation of improper animal use. China is still playing the catch up game in the field of animal medicine, and veterinarians and experts of such subjects are often scarce in the rural areas where farms are located. Without those who can properly diagnose and catch the beginning signs of disease, it will be near impossible for proper regulation of farms.

**Hong Kong**

While Hong Kong’s pork supply is largely dependent on China, discussion of their farming and animal handling practices must be discussed due to the origination of various animal diseases that have cause global scares in the past 20 years. Despite it’s small size relative to the other countries discussed, Hong Kong is a densely packed city that is brimming with people who have a taste for pork over other meats such as chicken and beef, and have continued their own local production and farming of pigs. The Chinese government annually grants a quota of live pigs to Hong Kong, and also supplies “chilled pork” from pigs in China, which is considered more superior than frozen pork products when freshly slaughtered pork is not available. The government in turn has been working diligently to ensure that imported pork undergoes proper inspection, where random checking procedures take places at warehouses in Hong Kong before they can released for shipment. While they have been monitoring the meat that has been coming in, there is a lack of concern for the welfare of the animals that are being raised in their own city. Many of these instances occur in multiple countries in Asia, including China and Korea, which exemplifies that these practices are not only inherent of Hong Kong farming practices. Reports from the SPCA in Hong Kong have graphic descriptions of how sows are treated during the duration of pregnancy. Many of them are kept in tight confining cages with no interaction, along with regulated food intake which is often limiting leaving them hungry in their pregnant state. When the sows give birth, they are given barely enough room for the new piglets and are not given enough material to nest to with her young. Within a few weeks, the sow is then inseminated again and the cycle continues until she is destined for the slaughterhouse. Unfortunately, the piglets also do not have a better fate that awaits them. Overcrowding again is a common issue, and aggression often follows after being raised in dark conditions, which leads to fighting and tail biting amongst those housed together.

Alarming is, Hong Kong does not require farmers to address specific welfare concerns and farm animals are not protected under general animal welfare laws. The health and welfare of pigs on farms are often not checked daily, and castrations are performed without anesthesia or proper veterinary regulations as late as two weeks of age, as compared to other Western countries where piglets are castrated between 2-6 days and require surgical anesthesia if performed any later. Lastly, there is a habit in both China and Hong Kong in which sick and dying pigs are dumped into landfills or bodies of water, which is strictly illegal and contributes to the contamination of natural resources and provides opportunity for a slurry of health issues to
arise (6). As mentioned earlier, although Hong Kong is not a meat exporter, it’s large population and seaport location allows for many humans to come in contact with animal disease, and because of the city’s economic importance in the business world, Hong Kong and its people are able to reach people and areas around the world.

Korea

The country of Korea has proven itself to be a rapidly developing power in technology and business, but has also fallen short in terms of proper farm animal management within the last 10 years. The Korean population also depends heavily on pork in their native cuisine, as it is often a cheaper and more accessible alternative to beef and is a much more popular meat choice compared to chicken. An outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2010 caused a huge scare in the nation, and pigs as well as cows housed in nearby farms were affected (7). Detection of the disease was delayed due to misdiagnoses and this further propagated the spread of FMD before the proper animals could be properly quarantined, treated, or culled (7). However, due to the large number of farms that had been affected by the disease, FMD was difficult to contain as some farms who were required to cull livestock did not follow time regulations. Additionally, farms were often located in close proximity, which led to cross infection of not only pigs, but also cattle, goats, and deer (7).

What is of particular concern is the report that the animals were buried alive during the wide scale cull, when many of them could have been euthanized humanely or treated with vaccines. It is estimated that 3.48 million animals were culled by large scale burial, a practice that is considered acceptable due to the scale of the outbreak (7). Accounts of such culling occurrences have been gruesome, with descriptions of how multiple piglets were placed in bags to be buried alive and of grown pigs who struggled to escape only to be pushed back and beaten with shovels (8). Furthermore, vaccines were administered late and because of the high costs it incurred to administer them, many farmers and government organizations resorted to the simpler solution of burying the animals instead of vaccinating to give the animals a chance to fight off the disease (8). Additionally, like China, Korea possess a lack of veterinary professionals trained for livestock which leads to more and more ignorance and misdiagnoses that can be prevented when properly educated individuals are involved (8). It is believed that the virus was brought into the country by a farmer who went to South Asia in Early November, which leads to another country that must be discussed at length (7).

Vietnam

Conditions in Vietnam are considerably more alarming than most countries, due to their more recent emergence into the porcine industry. Because of their haste to catch up to competitors, they have adapted many improper practices in confining pigs, almost modeling those of China’s. Sows are again, housed in sow gestation stalls, with little room to maneuver and which lack all sorts of proper enrichment to ensure good health and physical stimulation (9). Sanitary conditions are often quite poor, and Vietnam has also shifted towards a focus in manure management and production (9). This has incurred more problems with the treatment of the pigs as they are kept in empty barren concrete pens with no bedding material to nest or forage in (9). In addition to confining practices, Vietnam’s eagerness to expand their porcine industry has also
caused smaller farmers to find ways to maximize profits, such as using lower quality feed in place of industrially formulated feeds that are properly balanced for nutrition in these animals (10). Like China, Vietnam also is known for using pigs that possess lower quality genetics that can lead to decreased vitality of herds and disease resistance.

Vietnam is still a developing country, and it is known that the environment in which animal production is conducted is often considered weak in bio-security and sanitation is lacking in slaughtering areas and markets, which easily leads to increased animal disease risk (10). Moreover, it is established that the standards of pork produced by smaller farms often do not meet the proper health requirements and regulations for retailers, but such farms continue to thrive because people are not properly educated on how dangerous it can be to consume unregulated pork. Furthermore, regulation of waste disposal is poorly overseen so pollution from pig farms is often a major problem in rural areas.

**Taking Action: Healthy Pigs = Healthy Pork = Healthy You**

The lag in animal welfare overseas in Asia is mostly due to cultural differences and traditions that have perpetuated through many generations. While Western cultures have regarded companion animals with much love and compassion, Asia is now just barely grazing the surface of the many animal welfare issues that lie before them. It is very difficult to find information about animal issues in Asia merely because a majority of the governments and people do not see it as an issue. Even up to 2012, there has not been a full comprehensive study on the current welfare of farm animals in China and Animal Welfare organizations are only just beginning to form, with more emphasis and attention being brought to companion animals over farm animals (3) Based on general online research, it is evident that more people are becoming educated about the issues that surround animals, but much of the focus is on animals that bring us companionship, mainly dogs and cats. For example, Korea has recently begun a large campaign to end the practice of dog meat in cuisine, and many supporters have rallied together to protest against the inhumane treatment of dogs during various “dog meat festivals” (11). Letters are being written to government leaders and lawmakers to pass laws that will stop animal abuse against dogs and cats and bring justice to those who have committed such crimes. Similar activities are sprouting in China and Hong Kong, which has been encouraging to animal lovers across the world. China has begun spreading paraphernalia educating the public on where their meat comes from and the issues that surround it (3). Hong Kong has been tackling the puppy mill trade and has made great strides in finding and persecuting those who have been abusing animals (5). However, little is found on these animal welfare websites to better the lives of farm animals. While Hong Kong, Korea, and China have local organizations and advocates, local animal welfare groups in Vietnam are virtually nonexistent. The Korea Animal Rights Advocates have organized some rallies against farms that unnecessarily culled their pigs, but no action has been taken to contact government officials. Without local animal rights advocates speaking for these pigs living in deplorable conditions, how much longer will disease outbreaks continue to occur?

As a solution, a proposal for farm animal welfare programs for these various countries has been developed and sent to these various organizations. This plan will include the establishment of a farm animal welfare branch for each of these countries’ animal rights
programs. Furthermore, a basic plan of action to gather support can be implemented. After the development of the farm animal group, it is of utmost importance to begin to educate the public. This should be done through various outlets, including written articles to local newspapers, flyers, and the utilization of social media in this modern technological age. Research should be done to trace where meat is coming from at local markets, supermarkets, and other distributors. Oftentimes, people continue to fuel bad farming practices because they merely do not know they exist in the meat they are buying. By educating the locals, people will begin to be more wary as to where their meat is coming from. Additionally, it is extremely important to properly educate people about how disease spreads from animals to humans. As humans, we are often unmoved until we see the immediate threats that can endanger our livelihoods. By providing information on how important it is to have proper animal handling and distribution practices, people will begin to see the urgency of the issue. With this in place, it will be easier to rally citizens to press for better regulation practices in the industry, and this begins with contacting experts in the animal field. Letters should be sent to first local veterinarians and regulation personnel to bring to light the issues that have been uncovered. Additionally, experts involved in the U.S. and other European countries livestock and food regulation should be persuaded to help with auditing procedures and evaluations, since the threat is not only limited to Asia. Local and international veterinarians and livestock trained individuals are the forefront in persuading lawmakers and higher officials to install permanent regulations and laws, as the lack of knowledgeable farm management personnel contribute to ignorance and continual dismissal of such issues. Additionally, education in Asia in the field of animal studies is weak, and there are currently no accredited Asian veterinary schools. In order to properly educate future educations to prevent such disasters, a stronger foundation must be built in the education system regarding curriculum that concerns animal disease and animal handling. Asian students and international scholars studying in the U.S. and Europe who have an interest in animals and veterinary medicine should also be encouraged to return back to their homeland to help put their training and knowledge to good use in these countries. It can be seen that similar programs relating to animals that are loved in homes have had much success, and it can only be hoped that programs relating to the meat we put in our stomachs can have the same impact and fruition.

References


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**Letter to the Editor – sent to TIME MAGAZINE**

Dear Editor,

With the globalization of our world, it has recently come to my attention that attention must be paid to the current situation of the livestock overseas. In particular, the porcine industry in Asia is of utmost concern due to various outbreaks of porcine circovirus in Shanghai, foot and mouth disease in Vietnam, and porcine epidemic diarrhoea (PED) in China, Korea, and the Philippines. Your article in February regarding the meat in China, particularly pork, is of utmost concern and it is alarming more is not being done to prevent the situation from worsening. I have done a significant amount of research about the porcine industry in Asia, and while policies are improving, there is still much to tackle. I believe that much of these problems have stemmed from the farmers trying to meet an insatiable demand for pork products, and in turn have decided to disregard and neglect proper farming practices. While animal advocacy groups have begun to form, most of these focus on companion animals, oftentimes relating to fighting the consumption of dog meat. Of the few websites and organizations that address such farming practices, many of them only offer the solution of becoming a vegetarian. However, this is not a practical solution, due to the fact that many Asian cultures have meat dishes deeply embedded in their traditional cuisine. A monumental shift in dietary choices will not occur overnight, and therefore it is necessary for action to be taken on the farming regulation scale. I believe it is important to petition overseas animal welfare organizations to begin expanding beyond the realm of companion animals and to actively campaign for legislation to regulate livestock regulation. We must also make it well known to public health officials that ensuring proper animal handling...
practices will also ensure the health of humans society. Global epidemics that have occurred in the recent decade have often stemmed from animal causes, and we can prevent this as more producers and consumers become educated.

Although our barbeque ribs and filet mignon may not be coming directly from livestock in Asia, the global health threat is real and has occur right on our soil. The time is now to speak up, take action, and ensure the health of future generations, pigs and children alike.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Jamie So
Rutgers University ’14